THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

CAMEO

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FEATURING TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

THE JADE PAGODA

TAWNY HATED LORD GORDON FOR SENDING HER OVER THE HIMALAYAS; NOW SHE FACED THE MAN HIMSELF

MY BELOVED ISLAND

HE SWEPT OUT OF HER PAST TO THREATEN ALL SHE HAD LEFT

PLUS SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES INCLUDING:

A PLEDGE OF HONOR

AND

THE GENERAL'S EXTRAVAGANT EMPRESS

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Franco Accornero

Tawny Butler and Lord Gordon Harding in India, after night has fallen, standing on the balcony of the British Residency at Kathmandu. From the novel *The Jade Pagoda.*

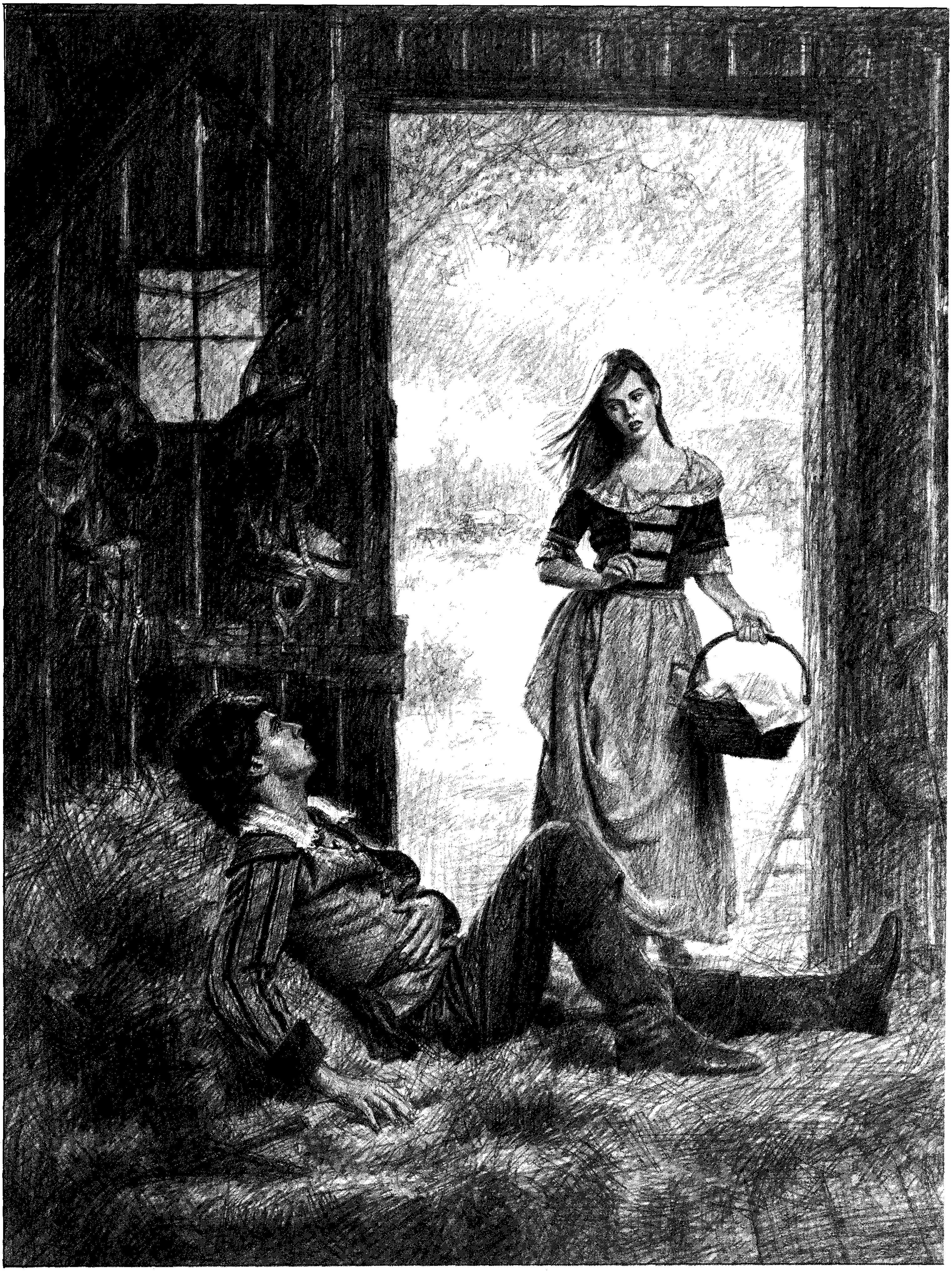
A Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

History, in league with nature, tells us that seasonal changes evoke emotional changes. In the fall of 1936 Edward VIII decided to renounce the throne of the Court of St. James to 'marry the woman I love.' Another romance of historic proportions began in the fall of 1955 when Grace Kelly finished making a film in France. After the announcement of her engagement to Prince Rainier of Monaco, her father remarked, 'She went to the Riviera to make To Catch A Thief -- and look what she came back with.' Napoleon had his first fateful encounter with Josephine in the fall of 1795 (see Leora Sies' fascinating story of Napoleon and Josephine on page 13).

'To everything there is a season,' but as the autumnal equinox approaches and the night overtakes the daylight, the exception to that Biblical truth grows in importance. For although the changing seasons affect love's comings and goings, or temper love's nature, love knows no season. There's magic afoot in the crisp, clear days and brisk nights of autumn for all of us -- especially for those who enjoy the magic of romance all year long.

Happy Reading,
Manon Tingue
Manon Tingue
Editor



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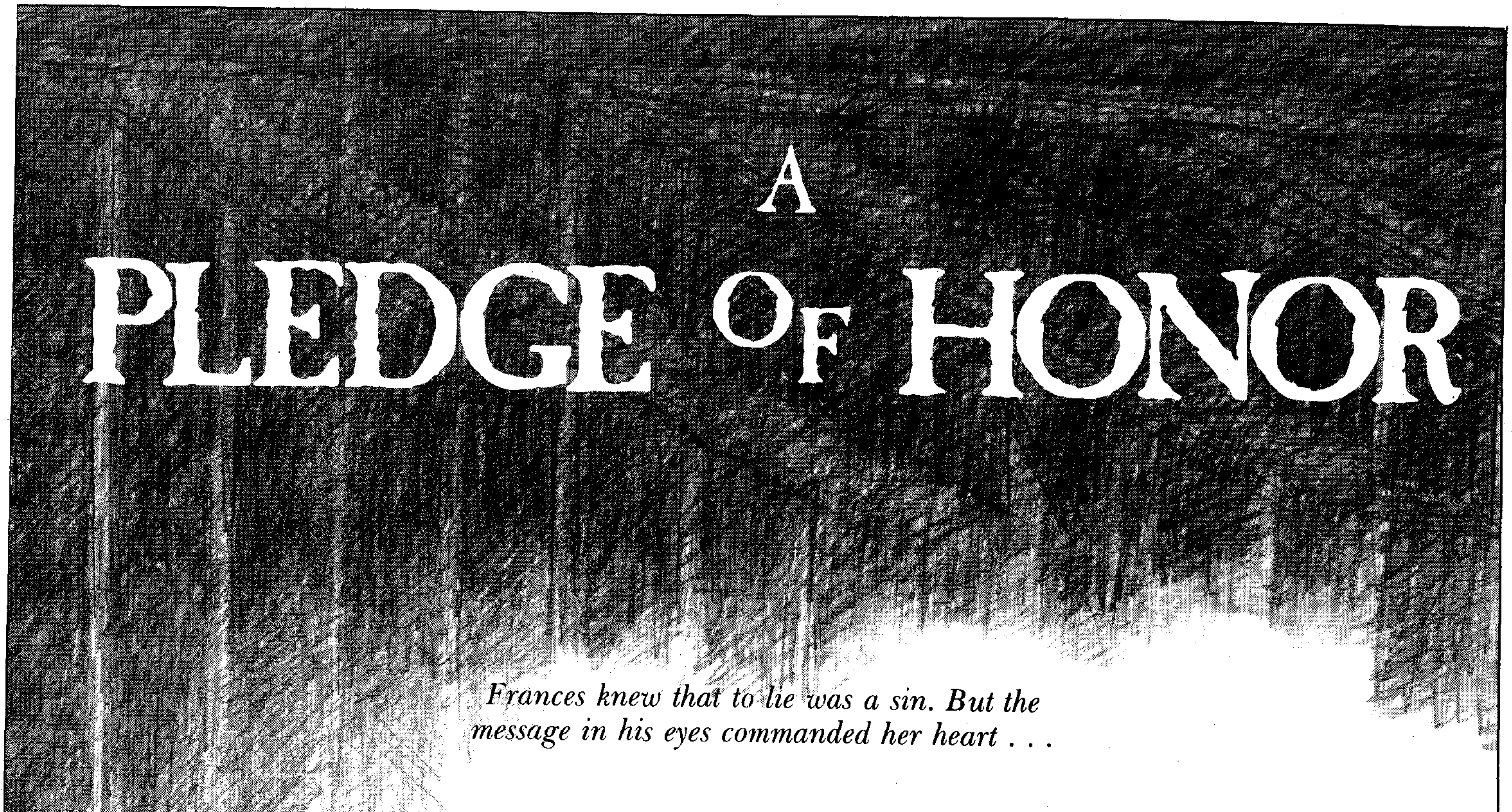


A PLEDGE OF HONOR

Frances knew that to lie was a sin. But the message in his eyes commanded her heart . . .

A short story by Terry Crane

In the warm, still air of mid-June the smoke from the Gypsy fires in the small encampment by the river rose to the blue sky in fragrant threads. Frances shifted her heavy basket with its precious load of eggs from one arm to the other, her eyes scanning the grassy track in front of her, the tangled hedgerows, the fields beyond. Where was that wretched cat? She could smell the drift of woodsmoke in the air. How on earth could she face old Sebastiane and tell him that the kitten he had given her was lost?

"Mishto? Mishto!"

The Gypsies would be gone soon, so Amos, Sebastiane's son, had told her. They had stayed longer than usual this year, for with civil war raging in England few roads had been safe to travel. "To be a Gypsy was a risky enough business, even at the best of times," Amos had said, grinning. Not to mention the chance of getting caught up in a war that was none of their business.

But now at last, on this June day of 1645 there was some firm hope that the raging war might come to an end. For Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan general, champion of Parliament and of the people, had won a great victory. King Charles and his pampered and plumed Royalist troops had been defeated and scattered. Like Frances' own family, the village in which she lived had been unswervingly on the side of Parliament, fighting for the democratic rule of the people over the so-called Divine Right of a selfish and autocratic King. And when the first news of the victory at Naseby had arrived in Northamptonshire it had been greeted with jubilation. God had shown His will, and had fought on the side of righteousness. Stern Cromwell, pious and honorable, had been given the day over an arrogant and wicked King. The Devil was defeated.

Frances had just hoped, listening to the impassioned speeches, that it meant that the killing at last would stop. She had lost one brother fighting with Cromwell at Edgehill three years ago; she did not want to lose another, and Benjamin was still in the field with the Parliamentary forces. She thought of her mother's anguish at the death of Robert, her eldest son, of her constant watch for news of Ben. All over England mothers watched so; Roundhead or Royalist, what did it matter to a bereaved mother? Or a sister, either. Sighing deeply, Frances put down her basket for a moment. Where was that kitten?

In the branches of a tree above her head a robin sang, the lovely sound ringing across the quiet fields. She gazed about her. The war had not touched this, their own corner of Essex. The woods were quiet and deeply shadowed in the summer sun, the hedgerows thick and fragrant with wild flowers. Frances tried to imagine the desolation and destruction of a battlefield, but could not. And yet she supposed that battles had been fought in just such countryside as this.

A flash of movement in the field to her right caught her eye—a black and white streak from hedgerow to barn.

The kitten.

She picked up the basket and ran to the gate in the hedge. The barn, its thatch badly in need of repair, neglected as so many of the farm buildings had become since her elder brothers had been away, stood in the corner of the field.

"Mishto! Bad cat! Come here . . ."

She stood in the sunshine by the doorway straining her eyes to pierce the darkness within. Bright shafts of sun cut through the damaged thatch, and dust danced in the light. Blinded, Frances listened intently. Something rustled in the straw. Putting down her basket she stepped quietly into the gloom.

"Come, then, good cat. Come on. I shan't hurt you, silly thing. Oh, do come—"

The barn was cool after the sun, full of small noises, rustlings and scratchings. As her eyes became more accustomed to the dim light she stepped forward, and a movement to her right made her swing sharply round.

The hand which clamped, sudden and painful, across her mouth and nose was as hard and unyielding as a steel band. Shocked, she staggered and would have fallen but for the strength of the arms which held her. She flailed wildly, trying to strike her assailant. But he was behind her, one hand still firm over her mouth, the other encircling her waist and trapping her left arm at her side. She bit and she kicked, and thrashed her head from side to side. Not for nothing had she been brought up with brothers. The man behind her swore as her teeth found purchase on his hand. She almost slipped away, but his hand, pulling her kerchief from her head, found her thick hair and she gasped with pain as he twisted his fingers deep within it.

"For God's sake!" The words came to her through a haze of pain. "Stop it, will you? I don't want to hurt you."

She lashed out once more with her foot, felt it connect with a knee and drew some satisfaction from the grunt of pain which followed. Then she stilled, panting, her head turned forcibly away from her attacker by his iron grip on her hair. There was a moment's silence; the heavy air of the barn was filled with the flying dust of the struggle. The hands that held her warily loosened their grip; the tearing agony in her scalp eased.

"If I let you go," said a breathless voice close to her ear, "do you promise not to scream? Or run?"

She did not for a moment answer. The ruthless grip on her hair tightened.

"All right. I promise."

The man hesitated, then released her with a little push which sent her stumbling further into the barn. By the time she had recovered herself he had stationed himself between her and the door. Silhouetted against the brilliant light stood a slim figure, hatless, with black hair gilded bright by the sunshine behind him. He spread his arms, anticipating her dash for the door.

Frances lifted her chin, pushed her hair back from her face. "I promised I wouldn't run."

She sensed his surprise. His arms dropped to his sides. "And do you always keep your promises? Even in such—unpromising circumstances?" His voice was light and sharp; young.

"Yes, I do."

"I see." He did not move from the door and still she could not see him clearly. With as much composure as she could manage she shook the dust from her skirts, brushed it from her bodice.

"I'm sorry," he gestured with one hand, the lace at the wrist falling elegantly with the movement. "I really didn't mean to hurt or frighten you. I had been asleep. You took me by surprise. I couldn't risk your rousing the neighborhood, couldn't tell if you were alone. . . ." Despite an obvious effort, he could not keep the light tone in his voice. The last words were spoken on a harsh note of pain.

Frances stepped forward, noting the slump of his shoulders, suddenly certain that he would pose no further threat to her. He straightened as she approached, half-turned from her, the light streaming across a face tight with anguish. His right hand grasped his left shoulder where bright new blood was beginning to seep through material already darkened by an older stain.

Ruined velvet, torn lace, the glint of silver from buckles and buttons. A King's man.

Frances stopped a few feet from him. He could no more stop her from leaving now than he could fly in the air. They both knew it. His face was thin, sharpened by pain, and deadly pale against the darkness of his hair and eyes. Blood now ran from his shoulder and fell between his long fingers, staining the tattered lace at his wrist. A Royalist like this one had killed Robert.

He looked to be young—not much older than she herself. Frances could see he had no weapon. He watched her, and suddenly saw the indecision in her eyes. A grimace that might have been a smile touched his straight mouth as he took in the dark, plain dress with its simple white collar and cuffs.

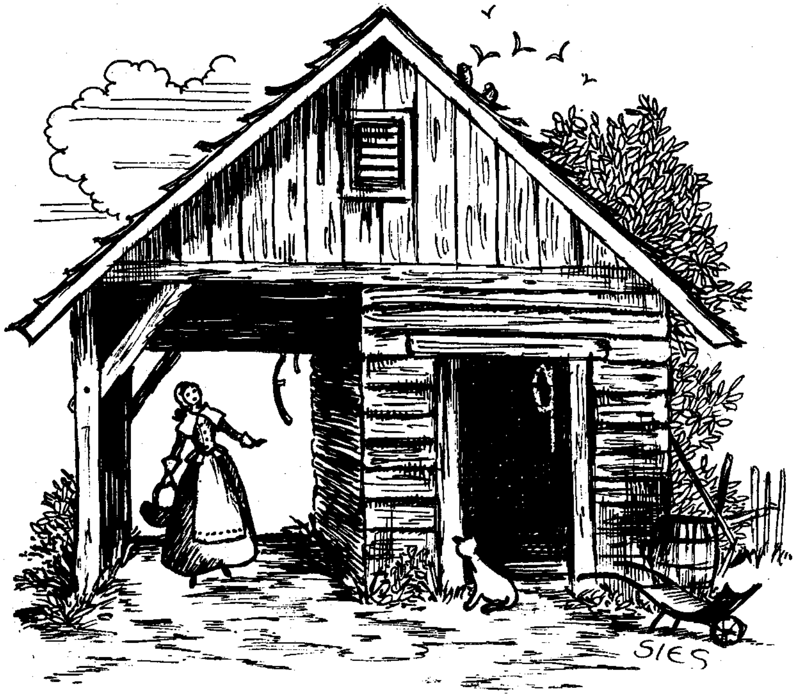
"A Puritan maid. My luck appears to have run out at last. . . ." His knees buckled and he staggered a little. Instinctively Frances stepped forward, her hands outstretched to help. He roughly brushed them away. "I can manage."

She doubted it. She watched him move unsteadily to where hay was piled, knee deep, in the dryest corner of the barn. But though he reached it, the effort was too great and he pitched forward and lay quite still, one velvet-clad arm flung out across the straw, the hand limp and lifeless.

Frances ran from the barn, the sunshine hitting her like a blow after the darkness. Stumbling, she ran across the field to the gate, her ankles turning on the rough ground. When she reached the track she stopped. Which way? Where was the closest help?

A thin pale face hovered in her mind. "My luck appears to have run out . . ."

He might be dead in there. She looked back at the barn. Or dying. It hardly matters anyway, said a practical voice inside her head. For he will most certainly die if you hand him over to the soldiers in that condition. And why not?



They killed Robert, didn't they?

Another face now rose in her mind. Robert's face as she remembered it; laughing and full of life. Handsome, kindly Robert. Supposing he, instead of dying at Edgehill, had fled the field of battle injured. What might he hope from the girl who found him?

Slowly she turned and walked back to the barn.

Frances sat back on her heels and wiped the tendrils of damp hair back from her sticky forehead. There. She had done what she could. Now he must fend for himself. Providing no one actually asked her—and there was no reason why anyone should—she would not mention him to anyone. There was surely no deception there? Her conscience squirmed a little. "A half-truth," her gentle, devotedly Puritan father always said, "is worse than a lie. It is often an attempt to deceive yourself as well as others."

Thoughtfully, she began to roll down her sleeves. She was hot and sticky; the dark stuff of her dress was covered in dust and stained with the water she had used to clean the young Royalist's shoulder. The wound had been encrusted with dried blood, and was seeping with new blood where it had broken open in his struggle to hold her. She had been relieved that he had remained unconscious as she had clumsily rolled him over and eased the cloth of his shirt and coat from the broken skin with water brought from the nearby stream. She had used pieces of his own shirt to clean and pad the wound, torn the lace from his wrists to tie it in place.

With her fingers she began to scrape back her hair, looking around for her kerchief. The fewer questions asked the happier she would be.

"You're much prettier without it." She paused, kerchief in hand, and turned to her patient. Dark eyes, ringed with pain and fatigue, smiled into hers.

She ignored the comment and pulled her thick fair hair back, just as her father liked it.

A narrow, long-fingered hand explored the padding around the wound. "Thank you. It feels much better. You are kinder than I deserve after the way I treated you earlier. I hope I didn't hurt you?"

"As a matter of fact you did." She was still busily tidying herself up, uncomfortably aware of her flushed and sticky face.

He smiled faintly. "You are very truthful."

"Yes," she said shortly. "I am. It is our way. And if I would not lie to save my own feelings, I see no reason to lie to spare yours."

He shifted in the straw, winced a little. "That's fair enough, little Puritan. And would you never lie?" She had the feeling that he was talking to keep her there, to stave off the moment when she would leave and he would again be alone.

She regarded him levelly. "Never. Not to save my life."

"And not to save mine either, I would guess. If someone asks about me?"

"I would have to tell them."

He nodded. "That's what I thought. In which case," he began to struggle upright, "the more distance I can put between us before someone thinks to ask you, the better." Using his good arm he pulled himself halfway up, on one knee.

"You can't," and he fell heavily. "For goodness' sake lie still." She pushed him, none too gently, back into the hay. "You can't move yet. And since there is no reason for anyone to ask me, you're safe for the moment."

He closed his eyes, defeated, his long lashes dark as the hair which curled loose on his cheek.

"Try to sleep," she said brusquely. "I'll come back when I can with food. After that you must fend for yourself. That's all I can do. You are the enemy to my family. And to my country."

His hand reached, touched her wrist and closed loosely around it. There was no strength now in his grasp and he had not opened his eyes.

"One favor. Please."

She did not move. His nails, beneath the blood and grime, were smooth and oval, well cared-for.

"I had a friend with me. Daniel Walters. He left me here and went to the village for food. He should have been back long since. He's a big man, fair like you. . . ." He smiled faintly again. "But nowhere near so pretty. *And* he lies like a Royalist trooper. I'm very worried for him."

She disengaged her wrist and stood up. "I'll see if I can find out where he is. But I can promise nothing. There's water to be had if you need it. I found a cup in the barn."

"Of course. Thank you." He was already almost asleep. Without a backward glance she left him.

Frances heard the commotion before she reached the village. Hovering on the edge of a seething, shouting crowd she found her own young brother, Thomas. The only one of the family who, wild to be a soldier, regretted the strengthening rumors of peace. She grabbed his arm.

"What is it? What's going on?"

He reached into her basket and pulled out two new-laid eggs, despite her protest.

"They've caught a Royalist stealing from Dent the baker. They're taking him to the magistrate. They'll hang him for sure."

The crowd before them milled and parted. She caught sight of a giant of a man wearing rich clothing torn and stained. His blond hair was tousled, and blood streamed down his face. Outnumbered by a hundred to one, unarmed against sticks and staves, still he was fighting. An egg, tossed by her brother, splattered on his shoulder. Another, not so well aimed, hit Stoughton the butcher, who was hanging on like grim death to the Royalist's arms.

There was nothing to be done here. She turned and fled.

He took the news calmly, leaning in the doorway of the barn as he looked out across the golden evening countryside.

"Aren't you afraid he'll tell them about you?"

He shook his head. "Not Daniel. He's the one who dragged me from the battlefield, got me away when I was bleeding like a stuck pig. He saved my life. Where are your scruples now, little Puritan? Should he tell the truth and betray a friend?"

"The truth," she said, quoting her father since she had no good answer of her own, "is above everything. For it is God's. Nothing should temper it."

She saw his shoulders drop a little and his face, what she could see of it, was grim.

"I wish I were as sure of anything as that." The words were not for her.

She was unpacking her basket. "I'm sorry. It isn't much. Bread and cheese."

"A feast."

"When did you last eat?"

He shrugged, winced. "A day or so ago."

She sat in silence and watched him eat, awkward with his one hand. He had not taken his eyes from the door.

"What's that smoke?"

"Sebastiane Calot's people. Gypsies. They always camp on my father's land when they're in this part of the country."

He raised his eyebrows. "That's unusual. I thought your people dislike the Gypsies."

"They do, mostly." She reached into

the basket and pulled out a bundle of black and white fur. "But these people are special. Sebastiane saved my life when I fell into the river when I was a child. I would certainly have drowned if not for him. Father said then that he and his people could stay here any time they wanted. Sebastiane and I are now friends. He gave me Mishto." She laid her face on the kitten's silky head. "I was looking for Mishto when I found you."

"Then I owe Sebastiane Calot—and Mishto—a debt of gratitude that I will not find easy to repay."

She shook her head, her eyes troubled. "That isn't so at all. It's because of me that your wound opened again."

"It's because of you that I'm eating now. And anyway," for the first time his eyes moved from the door and he looked directly at her, "it's certainly worth a little blood to find someone like you to tend me. And I don't even know your name?"

"It's Frances." She was unable to stop the color from rising in her face. Something in his eyes disturbed her, and she busied herself with the kitten that mewed and struggled in her arms until she had to let him go.

"And I'm Simon."

She smiled shyly. "How do you do?" and they both burst into sudden, irristible laughter.

"A little late for introductions," acknowledged Simon ruefully when they had regained their breath. "And certainly at the wrong end of our acquaintance. For I must leave. With Daniel caught, your Puritan friends may take it into their heads to search the countryside for more refugees. I can do nothing for Daniel in this state. And he would not expect it. If I were to be found here it would mean trouble for you, and I will not be the cause of that. How far is it to the coast, do you know?"

She shook her head. "It can't be too far. Thirty miles, perhaps forty. But you can't possibly walk that far in those clothes and with that shoulder!"

"I'll travel at night."

"You'll be caught." She was surprised at her own vehemence. "It would be stupid to go now. Wait a while, until your shoulder heals a little. The war is practically over they say." She saw him lift his head in sharp denial. "It is true. Your King has fled to Scotland."

"My King? Our King, Frances. Our annointed King."

"I won't argue that with you," Frances' mouth had taken on a stubborn line. "I've heard too much of the rights and wrongs of this dreadful war. All I know is that there has been too much killing. Brother against brother, father against son. It has to stop or there'll be nothing left." He was looking at her in surprise. She stood up, brushing herself off. "Don't let me hear you speak of walking to the coast yet. You're as safe here as you would be anywhere, and at least you have me to feed you and look after your shoulder." Her voice softened. "I'm sorry about your friend. I'll try to discover what's happened to him."

They both knew. She saw pain in his eyes. "This is a bad part of the country for a King's man to be taken."

She could not deny it. "Try to sleep now. I'll bring more food tomorrow." She walked briskly back home, trying not to think of the dark eyes with the sharp spark of interest in their depths. Refusing to acknowledge the reason for her sudden change of attitude toward the young fugitive in the barn.

Thomas was waiting, sitting astride the farm gate, his face brightly curious.

"Where've you been, Fran? You missed all the fun."

"Mind your own business." She opened the gate with the boy still on it, and shut it just hard enough to knock him off. He stuck his tongue out at his sister's back.

"They hung him," he called. "Told you they would."

She did not turn. He pulled a face. Getting above herself was Fran.

Three days later the soldiers came. They marched in fine order down the lane which passed the farm, beneath a sky leaden with storm clouds that had been threatening all day to drown the countryside in torrents of rain. The air was heavy, charged with the tension that precedes a violent storm. For an hour the thunder had rolled, menacing, in the distance.

Thomas stood at the gate and cheered the troops on. They marched with clockwork precision, their pikes steady on their shoulders.

"What do you think they're doing here?" Frances tried to keep the concern from her voice.

"Looking for what's left of the Royalist army," said her father as he picked up a heavy bucket. "I'm surprised they would think to come so far."

"The other one got here." Thomas was watching the retreating soldiers with longing in his eyes. "The one they hung. For all we know the countryside might be *crawling* with them."

"Don't be stupid," her voice rang out sharply. Thomas looked at her, puzzled. Really, Fran had been acting most peculiarly lately.

Their mother was calling from the kitchen. And Frances, eager to fly across the fields and warn Simon, had to turn demurely and walk across the yard to the house.

It was two hours before she could get away without being questioned. Thunder still rumbled as she hurried through the weird, stormy half-light down the track which led to the barn.

Behind her, unseen, flitted the small figure of Thomas. This time he would find out what she was up to.

Simon saw her coming and was waiting at the gate. His face, so much younger-looking after the rest and healing of the last few days, was alight with surprise and pleasure. But his smile faded as he saw the urgency in her face.

"What is it?"

"Soldiers. In the village. Father says they've come to search. I just passed a detachment on its way to the farm. Simon, you have to hide."

The shock showed in his sudden stillness, then he said, "They mustn't find me here, I'll go at once. It will bring trouble to you and your family." The regret in his eyes and voice was for more than the loss of a safe place to hide, and they both knew it.

Frances caught his hand. "No. Wait. Don't go off just like that. You'll be caught for sure. You don't know the countryside. And the whole place seems to be alive with soldiers. I've an idea. I'm sure it will work. But first we have to find you somewhere safer to hide. A barn is such an obvious place to search, and there's no escape if they find you. I'll take you to the woods. They're further from the house, and much better to hide in. Wait for me there. I won't be long."

"But what?—"

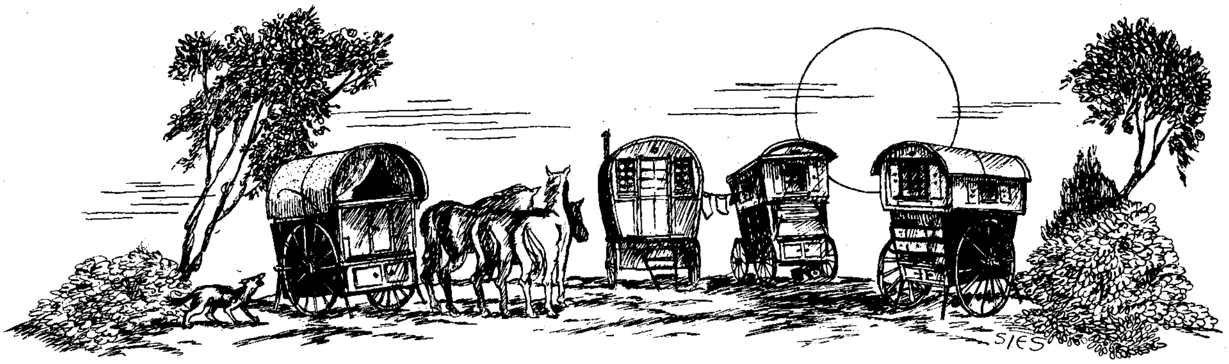
Her grip on his hand was fierce. "Don't argue! Come on. And don't try to run, you'll hurt your shoulder . . ."

She hurried him as fast as she dared across the field. A few moments after they had disappeared through the hedge on the far side Thomas swung himself over the gate and headed for the barn, and with a crash like cannon fire the first, heavy drops of rain began to fall.

Soaked as a drowned cat, her skirts slimy with mud, her hair in tails down her back, Frances slipped through the gate and across the yard to the kitchen door.

There was no sign of life. The rain still thundered down, pouring in waterfalls from the roof. The yard was ankle-deep in mud.

Please let no one be here. Her heart



was pounding harder than the rain. Please let me get in without being seen.

But as she pushed open the kitchen door she knew that slender hope to be gone. Her father stood, sterner than she had ever seen him, beside the kitchen table. Next to him, as wet as Frances herself, stood Thomas, with a light in his eyes that made Frances' heart sink.

On the table in front of her father lay a strip of the blood-stained lace that she had used to dress Simon's wound.

"Well, daughter? Where have you been in such weather?"

She did not, could not answer.

Her father's voice was sad beneath his sternness. "No need to reply. Your guilt is written in your face. Thomas has told me." He picked up the bloody lace, "Have you seen this before?"

"Yes."

"Where is the man?"

She shook her head, her eyes desperate. "I won't tell you."

A pounding on the door brought the high-pitched, excited voice of Dent, the baker. "Brother Williams! Open, quickly!"

Thomas threw open the door and the man fairly fell into the room, talking as he came.

"Sebastiane Calot's Gypsies. The soldiers have stopped them and are treating them very ill. They say the Gypsies may be harboring fugitives. I know of your regard for Sebastiane and his people. I thought you should know. . . ." He stopped suddenly, his eyes upon the blood-stained scrap which still hung from Frances' father's hand. Puzzled, he looked from one to the other.

"Brother Dent," the farmer's voice was firm, "my daughter has been, it seems, misled into aiding a fugitive from justice who rested, injured, in our barn." Baker Dent's eyes widened as he turned them to Frances. "She will be punished for it, you may be certain of that. To aid a King's man, an enemy who killed her brother and broke her mother's heart . . ." Frances could not protest. Her father's voice held a sorrow which twisted her heart.

Thomas was jumping up and down. "The Gypsies. The Gypsies! Of course! *That's* where she's taken him. She's the only one of us who really knows them. Old Sebastiane would do anything for her. He's with the Gypsies!"

Her father turned back to Frances. There was more gentleness in him now as he saw the depths of the distress in her face. He took her shoulders in his big hands, turned her to face him, his eyes on hers.

"I will not ask you now. Think upon this. Here is a chance to undo the harm you have done. You will come with us to the soldiers and you will show them the man you have aided, if he is there. My trust is in you. The Lord abhors a liar above all. You know it. No daughter of mine could look me in the face and lie."

"Amen to that." Baker Dent grasped her arm. "They have the Gypsies penned in the far field, just beyond the village. Come."

The field was a trampled sea of mud, filled with milling soldiers and curious onlookers. The Gypsy caravans were lined up along the hedge, the women and children clustered about them. The men had been herded into the center of the field within a ring of grim-faced soldiers. They had been treated roughly; beneath the brightening sky blood gleamed on heads and faces.

It had, at last, stopped raining.

The sergeant was a huge man, intimidating in steel and leather. The story was told, mostly by Thomas, and Frances stopped listening when she heard him say that he hadn't seen the Royalist's face. She stood, straight and pale, not looking at anyone. In her mind were dark eyes and a straight mouth; a mouth that had kissed her before she had left him. "No promises, little Puritan, it is too early. But the war cannot last forever. You are the truest girl I ever met."

She dared not lift her eyes to the encircled captives. Her father's voice now echoed in her mind. "The Lord abhors a liar above all. . . ." All her life had been lived with that uncompromising belief.

An argument was going on around her, and she heard the soldier sternly say, "She could go to prison for this." Then Baker Dent's voice, and others, good neighbors all, "Only a child, she was misled, threatened probably. Give her a chance to redeem her mistake. We know her well, and her family. They lost a son for Parliament." Perhaps that swung the balance. Rough hands caught her, sent her stumbling to where the Gypsies were.

"Well, girl. Your people have spoken for you, and I am inclined to take their word for your honesty. Look well, now. Is the man you aided here?"

She lifted her eyes. Dark, unfathomable eyes in swarthy faces watched her. She scanned every face, met Sebastiane's gaze, wise and sympathetic. And Simon's, aware and unafraid.

"He is not here." Her voice was clear and perfectly steady. "I set him on the road for Saffron Walden. He said he would steal a horse and make for London."

A moment of tension, and the ring of steel around the prisoners relaxed.

Her father touched her arm. "Are you certain of this, daughter?"

She met his eyes. "I'm certain."

No thunderbolt fell. She no longer expected it. She knew she was right. She had wronged no one. Truth might be more precious than most things, but it was never more precious than life.

As the caravans passed the silent crowd, swinging wide in the muddy field to get through the gate to the lane, Sebastiane smiled at her, lifting a hand in salute. The lad beside him, sitting a little awkwardly, did not smile. But his eyes lingered on hers until the caravan turned and he could no longer see her.

No, she had certainly done nothing wrong, she thought. As Simon's words echoed in her memory, "The war cannot last forever. You are the truest girl I ever met—"

◆

Illustrated by Clifford Timm

the voice from the cave

With a little bit of magic, Mary's dream of love might come true . . .

It was such a day that even robber barons and Mafia chieftains would take the day off and go fishing. A day so fantastic, poets would be struck with a frenzy of creation. In spite of all this beauty, this late spring tranquility, Mary Murphy was in a bad mood.

High above the little resort town of Langenbourg, Switzerland, Mary spent the last day of her vacation trudging perspiringly up the Magic Hiking Trail—so

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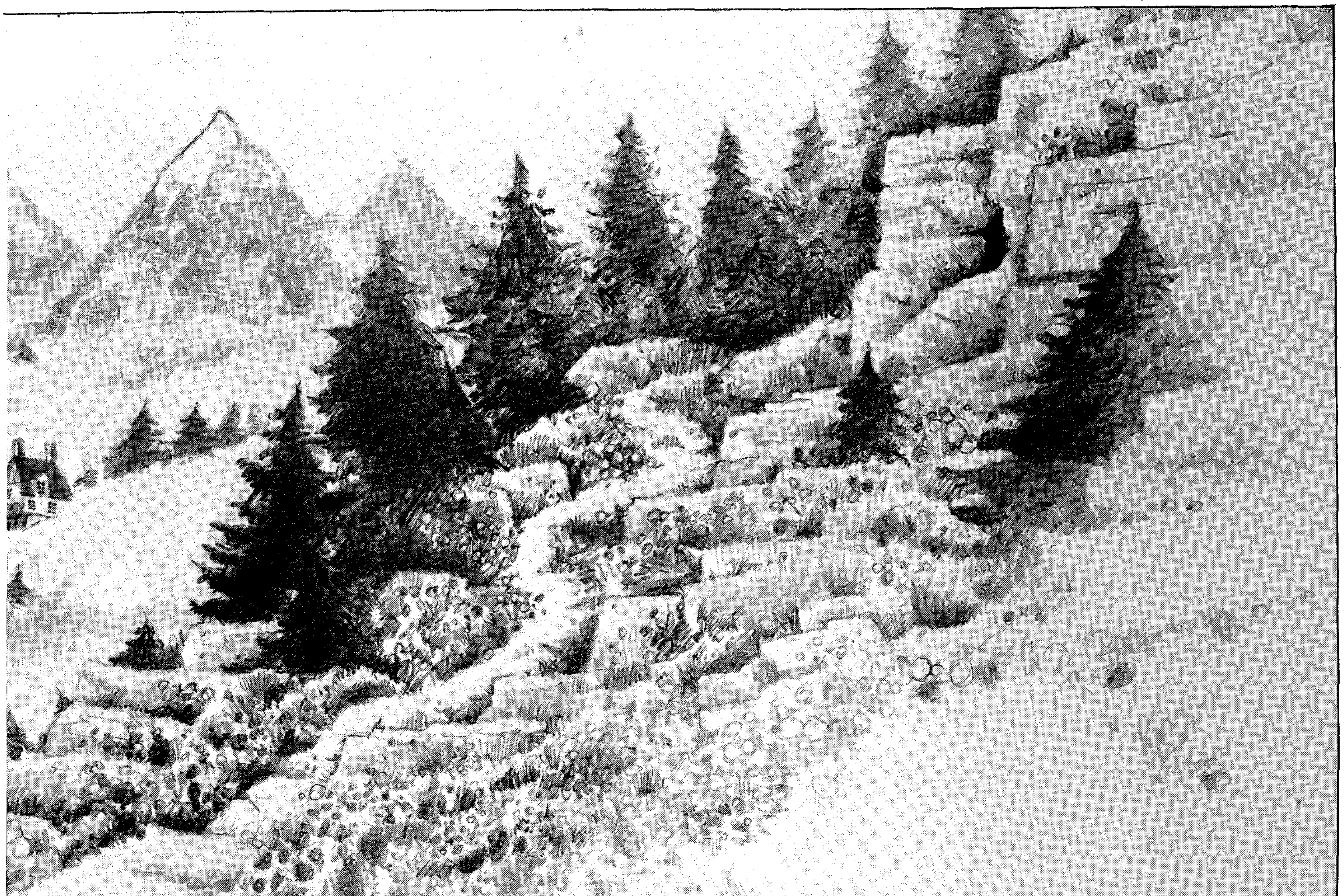
A short story by Robert E. Tinsley



named by the hotel publicity man. With each step, she cursed the day she bought the tickets back in New York. Everybody told her, "Mary, take a trip somewhere. Go to Europe; go anywhere. It'll take your mind off your weight."

That piece of advice didn't work out. Her mind was on her weight more than ever now. She was having a difficult time maneuvering that snakey trail.

Why did I let that nitwit desk clerk at the hotel talk me into this?

The clerk had told her it was a mysterious trail, and many things could happen to an innocent girl along the narrow path.

Like falling into a canyon.

She was innocent, all right. Mary was twenty-five years old, single, and had never been away from New York City until that unscrupulous copywriter nailed her in one of those come-hither ads . . . and now, here she was, high atop old Mt. Bourganhammer, out of breath and out of sorts. She sat down to rest and plan her revenge against the person who wrote that ad, promising all that romance and ecstasy.

Ecstasy, is it? Sore feet is more like it, she thought.

"Help me, please help me," said a voice.

Mary Murphy, you're going over the edge. Now you're hearing things.

"Help me, please help me," the voice repeated.

She looked around again. "Is someone there or am I coming unglued?"

"Above the trail—there's a cave. See the opening?"

"Yes, I see it, but I can't climb up there."

"You must! You must get me out—I can't get out by myself."

"I told you I can't climb up there and I can't get through that little opening."

"What's your name, my dear?"

"Mary Fogarty," she said, wondering why she lied.

"That's a pretty Irish name, my dear, and you have beautiful red hair to go with it. How would you like to be queen of Ireland?"

"Ireland's a republic," she said, not quite so upset as before.

"So it is, so it is. What then would be your greatest desire?"

"Most of all, I'd like to get back to sea level. I'm not built for this nonsense."

"Be serious, now."

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I want to get married and raise a family. Why? What are you getting at?"

"It so happens that I'm magic and can turn myself into anything I want—after I get out of here, that is. Now, if you can get me out of here without any help, I'll turn myself into your dream man, whatever that is, and we'll live happily ever after. Deal?"

"Are you some kind of nut? If you're magic, how come you can't get out of the cave?"

"There's a spell on me. The only way I can get out is if someone wants me out bad enough to make a great personal sacrifice to release me."

"I can't get through that hole. What do you want me to do—burn a desk clerk at the altar? That I'll gladly do."

"My crystal ball tells me you're a bit overweight, Mary."

"A bit, he says."

"If you could lose some weight—enough so you could climb up here and slither down into my cave, we could close the deal."

"Slither? I don't know the meaning of the word. Besides, what happens if and when I get inside that cave with you?"

"Well . . ."

"Well what?"

"Why don't we just wait and see?"

"This has been a lot of laughs and all, but you've got to be as looney as a jaybird. How much time do you think it takes to lose enough weight to become a slitherer?"

"Well, let's see. My spell has another year to run, so if you're back by the fifteenth of June of next year, I can still honor my pledge. Otherwise, I'll self-destruct."

"Well . . ."

"Come on, Mary, you're hooked and you know it. You'll have to come back. If you don't, you're going to spend the rest of your life wondering about me, aren't you?"

"Maybe you're right. By the way, do you have a name?"

"I am Trebor—Prince of Kroywen."

"Okay, Treb. Right now, my principal concern is getting down this mountain without rolling down. I'll see you when I see you."

She started back down the trail, the incident with the voice practically forgotten, but for some reason, her footsteps were a little lighter and she whistled a nameless tune.

Mary returned home on the next flight out of Zürich and resumed her life as a member of the secretarial pool at the Federal Insurance Company. Day after day, encountering friends she hadn't seen since returning from vacation, she repeated the story about the voice from the cave. The story never lost its punch as each in turn offered his or her opinion about the voice. She was having fun with the story and the ridiculous fairy-tale aspect of the consequences, but it soon became apparent to her close friends that she was losing weight. One day at lunch, her best friend, Holly Katz, asked, "Mary, when was the last time you weighed yourself?"

"I don't know, some time ago. Why?"

"It may be my imagination, but—there's a scale over there. Go weigh yourself."

"But Holly . . ."

"No buts. Go weigh yourself."

"Oh, all right." She stepped on the scale and let out a squeal heard all over the restaurant. "I've lost twenty pounds—twenty pounds, Holly! How did I do that?"

"I've noticed that since you've come back from your trip, you've been eating less. A lot less."

"I have? I hadn't noticed. I wonder . . ."

"I'll tell you the truth, Mary. The girls all feel that the story about the voice from the cave is . . . well, we think you just made it up because nothing else happened. Now, I'm not so sure. This is intriguing."

"Come on, Holly, why should I make up something like that? Of course it happened! If I wanted to make up a story, it wouldn't be a fairy tale."

SEPTEMBER SONG

by Marilyn Eynon

Perennial as petals Aprils bring
love blossoms in symbols of spring . . .
or so the poets, with flourish, have
penned it
and doe-eyed lovers, exultant, defend it.

That's why, my love, I never claimed
to fathom love so autumn flamed . . .
surprising our season of April romance
with tender touch and gold in your glance.

But now I admit . . . my heart, a harlot,
reveled in rapture September scarlet
and more remarkable, in autumn,
is this . . .
to taste all April abloom in your kiss.

It was left at that, and in time the whole thing was forgotten. Mary continued to lose weight, and she continued to be a combination of envy and bewilderment to her friends, because no one could figure out her diet; there really didn't appear to be one.

At the end of spring, she displayed a curvaceous one hundred and twenty pounds on her five-foot-three-inch frame, and she had already called the travel bureau and booked the same hotel in Switzerland for the first two weeks in June. The week before she left, Mary went on a shopping spree for a new wardrobe as if some bride's magazine had bitten her. And included in her purchases was a flashlight and a length of rope. The first day of June found her high above the clouds, Switzerland-bound. She felt free—her spirits were soaring.

I fly through the air to a strange
rendezvous
I'm crazy as a loon, and I'm
skinnier, too.

The passengers all looked around. She hadn't realized she had sung out loud. *Well, they will have to think what they like,* she thought. *I'm going to see what that magician looks like or have myself committed.*

She landed in Zürich on the second of June, and an hour later she was bound for Langenbourg, two hours away.

On her arrival, she was greeted by the desk clerk.

"Good evening, madam, may I be of service?"

"I'm Mary Murphy. I have a reservation."

"Of course, madam, here we are. If you'll sign the register, I'll see to your luggage."

"Thank you."

"Has madam been here before? You seem familiar, but . . ."

"Yes, I have been here before." She added no more information, getting a perverse kick out of his inability to remember her as she was.

The next morning, Mary skipped breakfast and, with uncontrolled excitement, set off up the trail. She reached the cave entrance in less than thirty minutes. Without hesitation, she threw the rope cowboy-style over a ledge above the cave and pulled herself up with ease.

The cave entrance was about twelve feet above the trail and about two feet in diameter. Turning on her flashlight, she let herself into the cave entrance and proudly slithered down into the cave itself. It was about the size of a small bedroom, although she did have to stoop a little. She shined the light around and, except for a small squirrel-like animal whose curiosity outweighed its fear, she was alone.

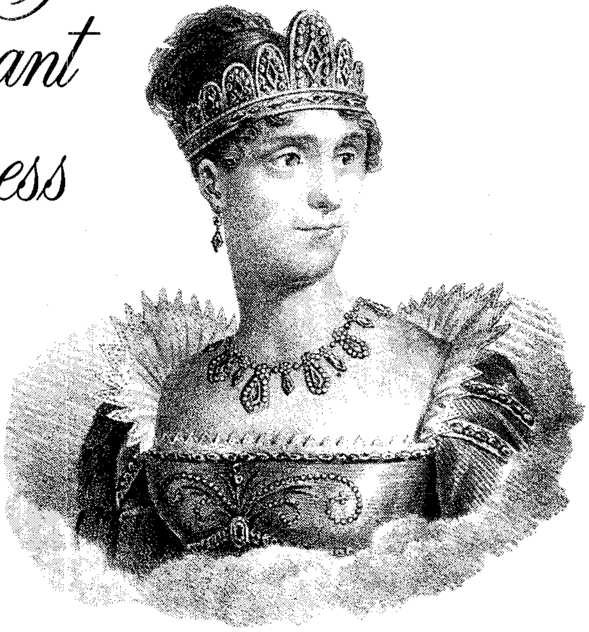
Okay, dummy, what did you expect? They probably hauled him away in a cage a long time ago—if he ever existed. Maybe you belong in a cave. Well, at least you slithered.

The tears came in spite of her case-hardened thoughts.

With great effort, she descended from the cave, threw the rope and flashlight into the canyon and made her way slowly down the trail. When she arrived back at the hotel, she went immediately to her room and a hot bath. The next day, she cancelled the rest of her stay at the hotel and took the train back to Zürich. From there, she flew the four hundred

(Continued on page 66)

The General's Extravagant Empress



The extraordinary story of a love that glowed with a thousand and one kisses . . .

He was constantly sending her a thousand and one kisses in those lyrical, passionate letters he wrote her two or three times a day during the early months of their marriage. They were extraordinary letters, the handwriting almost indecipherable, but marked by a tone so impassioned that no woman in the world could fail to take pride in having been their inspiration.

The writer was not a poet; he was a twenty-four-year-old military genius who was already General of the French armies in Italy. The letters were dashed off at his camp table, written by the light of bivouac fires after the din of battle had ceased. Several times a day he sent his thousand and one kisses to Paris as swiftly as he sent his military dispatches to the government.

"Here, for you, are a thousand and one kisses of truest, most tender love. You are the eternal object of my thoughts. My heart is dedicated utterly to you. I am enslaved, frightened that you do not love me. You are the one thought of my life. By what magic have you captivated all my faculties? This constitutes a kind of death, my sweet, since there is no survival for me except in you. To live through Josephine . . . that is the story of my life."

Dressed in full military regalia, the courier delivering Napoleon's missives would march into Josephine's salon with mud on his heels, the sweat of travel on his brow. With a click of boots and a clank of his sword, he would disrupt Josephine to hand her the letter, salute smartly and then leave as swiftly as he had come. Josephine would turn to whoever was with her, her couturier, Leroy, or sometimes a celebrated fop of the day and smile in her sweet, languid way.

"He's funny . . . Bonaparte," she would say in her soft Creole drawl and shrug

By Leora M. Sies

as if apologizing for the extravagance of passion she stirred in the untamed, fiery Corsican.

Although the love she inspired in so extraordinary a man evidently flattered her, in those early days she took their relationship less seriously than he. A survivor of the Reign of Terror, she had recently escaped the guillotine that had claimed her first husband and so many of her friends. Now that she was financially and physically secure, having married the new nation's most promising young man, Josephine was too busy entertaining and refurnishing her vast wardrobe to reply to her husband's urgent letters. It almost seemed as though her husband's passion left her unmoved. Frantically engaged in a whirl of social activities, she may not have even bothered to read Napoleon's ardent scrawl.

"Josephine, no letter from you!" Napoleon wrote over and over. "What then are you doing? Could you have forgotten me, or could you be oblivious to the fact that my greatest torment is in not hearing from you? The fatal thought that you might love me less blights my soul, congeals my blood, devastates me, strikes me down, deprives me of even the courage of fury or despair. It is as if I were suffocating. There is no one but me, is there? Sweetheart, forgive me, I am raving. Never was a woman loved with more devotion, more fire. Never has a woman been in such mastery of another's heart. Your portrait is always upon my heart. I send you a thousand and one kisses. Adieu, my beloved. Think sometimes of the one who thinks constantly of you, my beautiful Creole."

The sophisticated, worldly Parisians of the eighteenth century laughed at the slow pace of life among the Creoles. A popular joke told the story of a Creole woman who said to her slave, "Mimbo, tell Quashebah to tell Dido to tell Sue to come and pick up my needle." The slave replied, "Quashebah is gone to market and Sue is scratching the master's legs." "Oh, dear," the Creole lady sighed. "One must have the patience of Job. Now, I must wait two hours for my needle."

This was the society to which Marie-Josephe-Rose de Tascher de la Pagerie belonged. She was born on a sugar plantation on Martinique, one of the tinest and sleepiest islands in the Caribbean. Her parents called her Rose, after her mother, the name she used until she met Napoleon. The General changed her name, but not her destiny, for she had always known that someday she would be Empress of France. When she was a child a soothsayer had predicted her future, and Rose, being superstitious like most Creoles, believed the fortune teller.

"Someday you will be Queen of France," the ancient soothsayer lisped as she read the bones she had cast. The hut was smoky, and there was an acrid smell of incense in the air. "Yes, you shall be Empress."

"But . . . but how will I ever become Queen of France when I live here at Les Trois-Ilets?" fifteen-year-old Rose asked, her eyes wide with amazement. "No one important ever visits Martinique."

"Never fear, little Rose. You will be going to Paris soon. First, there will be an early marriage and two children," the soothsayer cackled and waved her hand in front of her wrinkled face as if to dissolve that image. "Yes, you will be left a young widow, but your next husband . . . he will make you Empress. You cannot forsake your destiny. It is predicted here . . ." the old crone stretched out a withered hand towards Rose and wiggled her fingers demanding her fee. She smiled toothlessly, but there was a strange glint in her eyes that made Rose afraid.

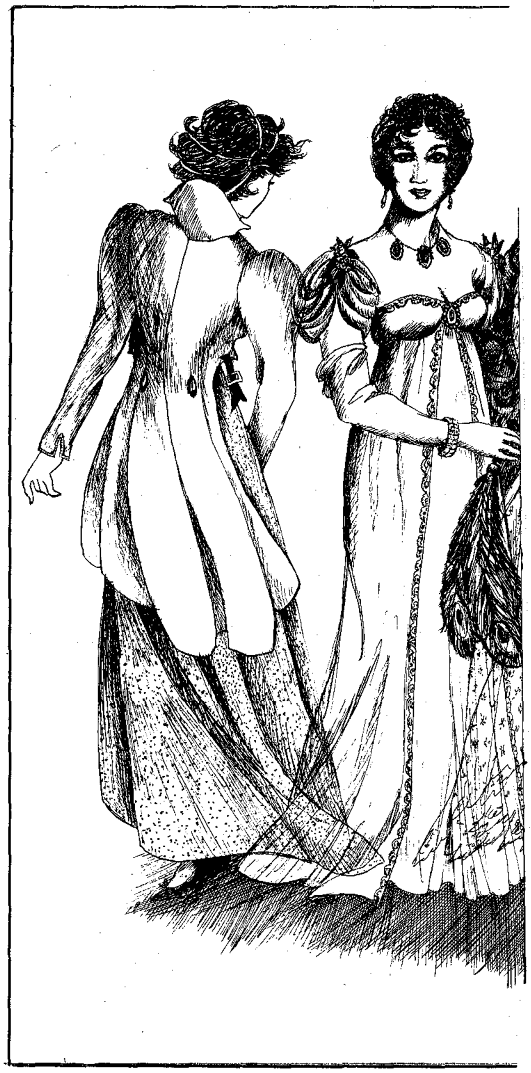
Rose dropped a gold coin into the seer's hand and ran out into the balmy night air. She fled to the plantation house as fast as her feet would carry her. Her heart was pounding and she was breathless, but she was no longer afraid. Rose was a superstitious Creole; she knew the old woman's prediction would come true.

Within a year, Rose was married to the narcissistic young rake, Viscount Alexandre de Beauharnais. The Viscount was one of the most attractive gentlemen of his time. He was also conceited and a roué who made a career of amorous dalliances. The marriage was never a happy one, but Rose adored her two children, Eugène and Hortense, and revelled in the extravagances of a Parisian society led by a King and Queen who would lose their heads for their excesses.

When the bubble burst and the Reign of Terror swept through France, Rose was confined to Carnes, one of the most hideous prisons in Paris. King Louis XVI had mounted the steps to the guillotine, followed soon after by Marie Antoinette. In Carnes rats crawled beneath dank walls that dripped with blood, smeared there during the September Massacres.

One morning the jailer came into the cell where Rose slept with the Duchess d'Aiguillon and two other ladies.

"Prepare yourself," the man snarled. "Your husband was executed this morning. They are coming to take you to the Conciergerie and from there to the guillotine."



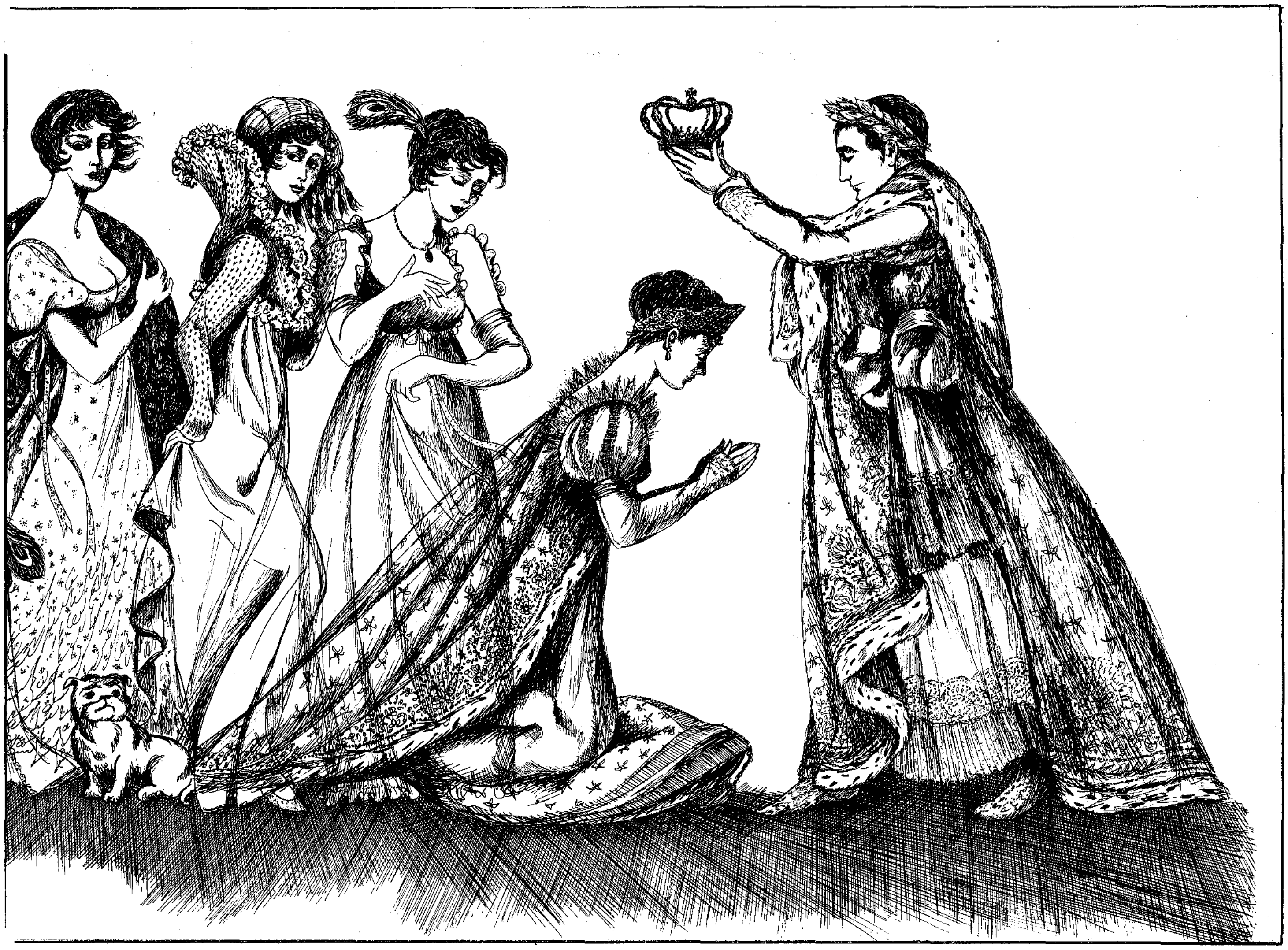
The Duchess d'Aiguillon shrieked, and one of the other ladies fainted dead away.

"Your distress for me is ridiculous," Rose told her friends, smiling through her tears. "I am not going to be put to death, for one day I will be Queen of France. It has been predicted."

"Then, why not begin making out the list of your ladies in waiting?" the jailer asked sardonically.

"Ah, you are right," Rose nodded sweetly. "Very well, I'll begin by appointing the Duchess d'Aiguillon as my Lady of Honor."

The Duchess could not control her crying. She was sure Rose had been driven stark raving mad. It was too much. The Duchess began to faint, and Rose helped her to the window. Outside in the street they saw a woman signalling to them that Robespierre was dead. The Reign of Terror was over.



"You see," Rose drawled in her charming Creole way. "I will not be guillotined, and I shall yet be crowned Queen of France."

The terror ended and Paris went into a state of delirium. The capital developed a mania for dancing that culminated in Victim's Balls. Rose de Beauharnais was eligible on two counts; as a former prisoner and as the widow of a victim of the guillotine.

It was the year of famine and yet the poverty-stricken widow collected bills for gray Florentine silk taffeta, multicolor hose, red ribbons to wear about her neck, a carriage for hire, and flowers, for she could not live without the flowers that reminded her of the gardens in Martinque. Her hair was cropped in the short wispy *coiffure á la guillotine* and she waltzed with General Hoche, polkaed with Paul Barras, one of the five directors who headed the new government, and allowed a new, intense longing for life to take over.

Borrowing from everyone, she became the best-dressed woman in Paris, draping herself in the scanty muslins inspired by the classical Greeks. The filmy knee-length tunics and wispy shifts showed off her beautiful figure to perfection. Everyone copied the styles set by the widow Beauharnais. Bare-skinned under lightweight muslins, more women died of pneumonia than ever before in the cold Parisian winter.

Rose was seen at the Opera and the Comédie-Française, at all the balls held at the Hôtel de Thélussons, and the fêtes in the Bois de Boulogne. Only a reigning beauty like Rose Beauharnais would have dared appear dressed in only a tulle shift over waist high, flesh-colored satin tights, arms and bosom bare, with diamond-studded gold circlets around her leg and thigh.

That was how Napoleon Bonaparte first saw her and, like so many others, he was immediately struck by her "extraordinary grace and her irresistibly sweet manner."

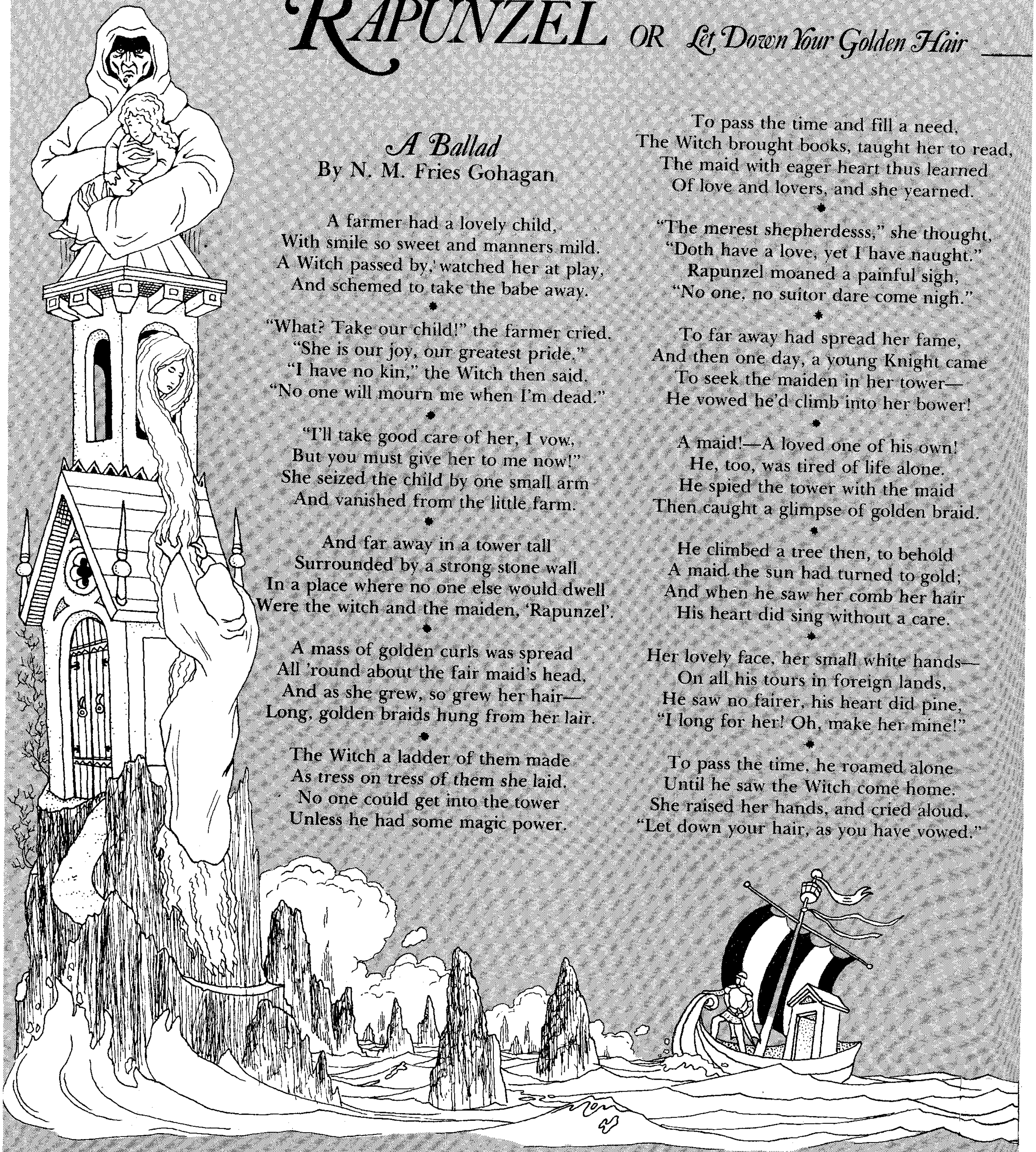
In a wily bid to meet her, the twenty-four-year-old Brigadier General took her son Eugene under his wing. His extraordinary kindness to Eugène guaranteed that his request to meet the mother responsible for inspiring such noble sentiments in a son would be granted. Rose invited Napoleon to visit her in her salon on one of her Thursday evenings.

At first, the young Corsican felt ill at ease in the circle of prominent figures from both the old and new regimes. But not for long, for Rose singled him out to thank him for his good service to her son. Napoleon was immediately engulfed by her smile, her beauty, her soft Creole drawl and her seductiveness. As usual, Rose had dampened her muslin frock when she put it on so that the fabric would mold to her body.

"I beg you to believe me when I say no one so yearns for your friendship as I do," Napoleon said in his forceful manner, his brilliant eyes lighting up as he gazed at her.

(Continued on page 67)

RAPUNZEL OR Let Down Your Golden Hair



A Ballad

By N. M. Fries Gohagan

A farmer had a lovely child,
With smile so sweet and manners mild.
A Witch passed by, watched her at play,
And schemed to take the babe away.

◆

"What? Take our child!" the farmer cried,
"She is our joy, our greatest pride."
"I have no kin," the Witch then said,
"No one will mourn me when I'm dead."

◆

"I'll take good care of her, I vow,
But you must give her to me now!"
She seized the child by one small arm
And vanished from the little farm.

◆

And far away in a tower tall
Surrounded by a strong stone wall
In a place where no one else would dwell
Were the witch and the maiden, 'Rapunzel'.

◆

A mass of golden curls was spread
All 'round about the fair maid's head,
And as she grew, so grew her hair—
Long, golden braids hung from her lair.

◆

The Witch a ladder of them made
As tress on tress of them she laid,
No one could get into the tower
Unless he had some magic power.

To pass the time and fill a need,
The Witch brought books, taught her to read,
The maid with eager heart thus learned
Of love and lovers, and she yearned.

◆

"The merest shepherdesss," she thought,
"Doth have a love, yet I have naught."
Rapunzel moaned a painful sigh,
"No one, no suitor dare come nigh."

◆

To far away had spread her fame,
And then one day, a young Knight came
To seek the maiden in her tower—
He vowed he'd climb into her bower!

◆

A maid!—A loved one of his own!
He, too, was tired of life alone.
He spied the tower with the maid
Then caught a glimpse of golden braid.

◆

He climbed a tree then, to behold
A maid the sun had turned to gold;
And when he saw her comb her hair
His heart did sing without a care.

◆

Her lovely face, her small white hands—
On all his tours in foreign lands,
He saw no fairer, his heart did pine,
"I long for her! Oh, make her mine!"

◆

To pass the time, he roamed alone
Until he saw the Witch come home.
She raised her hands, and cried aloud,
"Let down your hair, as you have vowed."

"Rapunzel, fair, let down your hair,
To bring me up into your lair."
Rapunzel, sweet, with goodness filled
Did just as her stern captor willed.

*

Her plaits descended to the ground,
The Witch climbed up. The Knight had found
The way to reach the captive maid.
He'd try the same, nor be afraid.

*

He waited til the Witch went out
(On witchly business, without doubt).
The dark-haired Knight approached the wall.
With gentle voice, he then did call,

*

"Oh, lovely maid, let down your hair,
So golden, like a treasured stair."
He held his breath, the hair came down;
He climbed her ladder from the ground.

*

Into their hearts, love came so fast,
They both forgot the lonely past.
In love's sweet arms the two did find
A calming bliss, a peace of mind.

*

The Witch came back and maddened grew
At both the Knight and maiden, too.
She blinded him, and cast him forth,
Then took the maid and travelled north.

*

She took Rapunzel far away
So she would never find her way,
The Witch took all her pretty clothes,
Her hair cut off, left naught but woes,
And sent her forth to beg for food,
And make her bed as best she could.
She wandered over hill and dale
To find her love, perforce to fail.

*

The days of summer turned to fall.
Rapunzel, weary with it all,
In sadness, sat beneath a tree,
And pondered how she could get free.

*

She moaned aloud, and heard a sigh—
Behold! A young man lay nearby.
She stroked his face, and shed a tear—
At last she'd found her Knight so dear.

*

Her tears fell on his eyelids dim
As Rapunzel bent over him.
He sighed, and opened wide his eyes,
And then gazed upward to the skies.

*

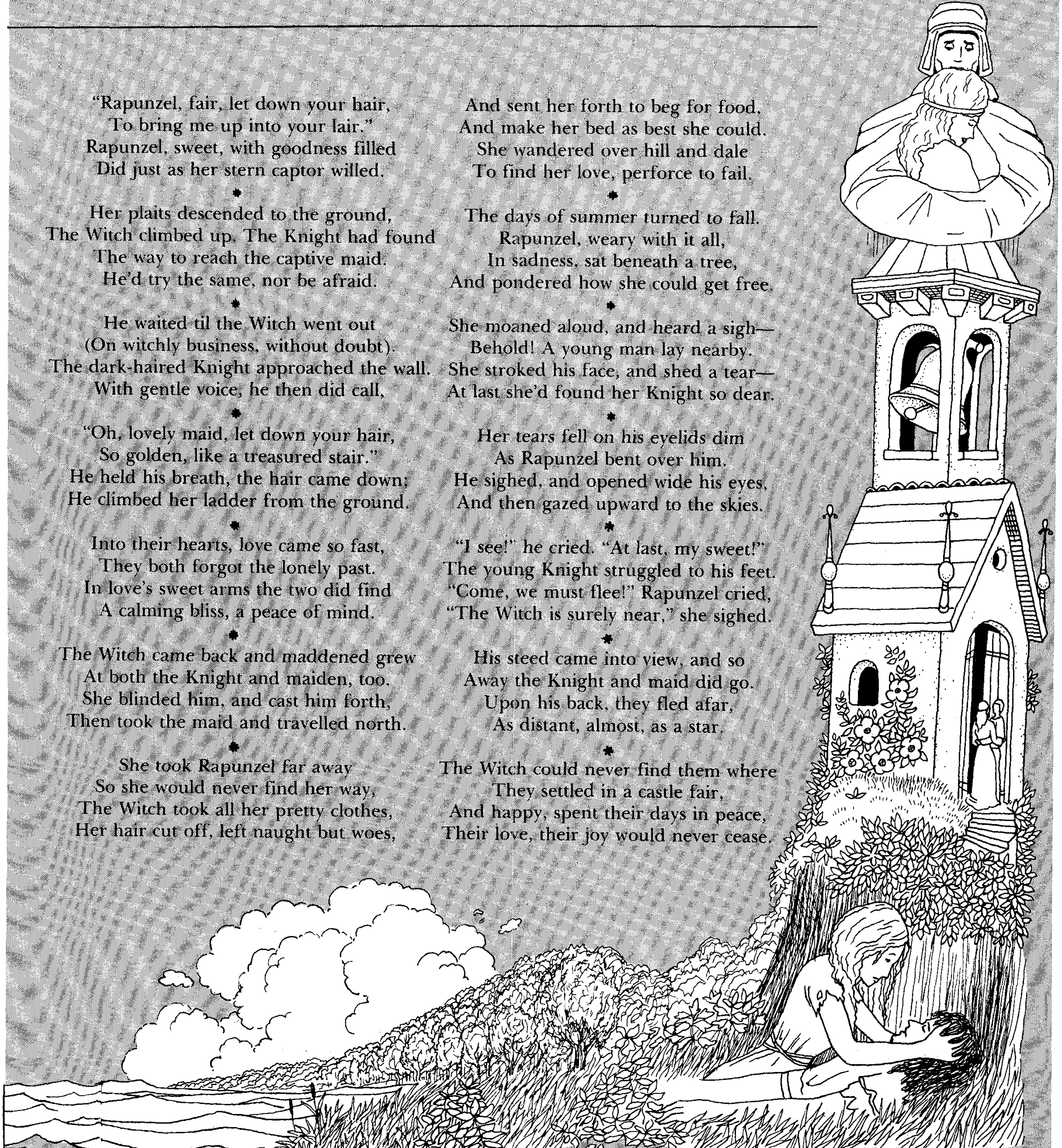
"I see!" he cried. "At last, my sweet!"
The young Knight struggled to his feet.
"Come, we must flee!" Rapunzel cried,
"The Witch is surely near," she sighed.

*

His steed came into view, and so
Away the Knight and maid did go.
Upon his back, they fled afar,
As distant, almost, as a star.

*

The Witch could never find them where
They settled in a castle fair,
And happy, spent their days in peace,
Their love, their joy would never cease.



Illustrated by Wayne Atkinson

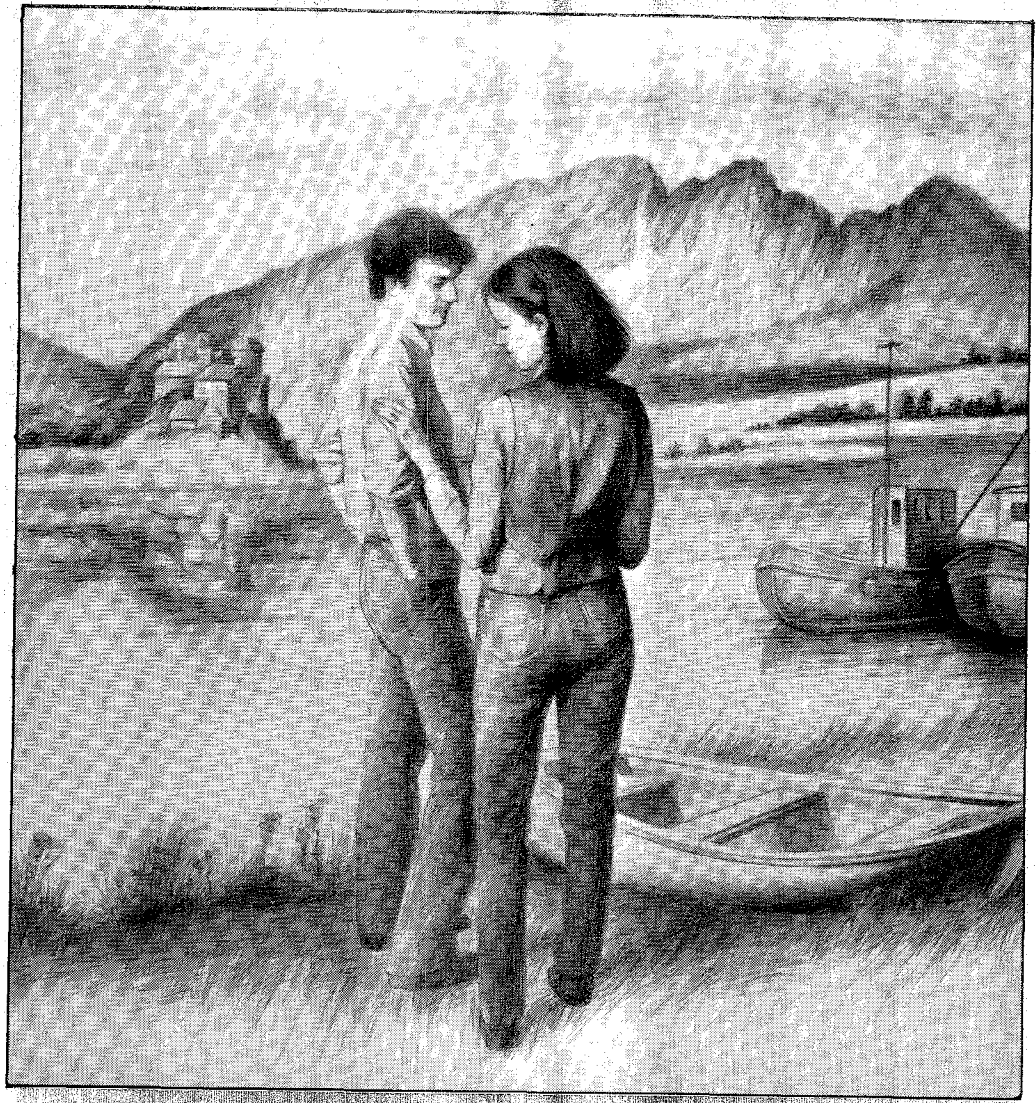


Illustration by Steven Assel

BY

I. M. FRESSON

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

I walked out to the drive to wait while Mario brought my car around. For days I had been struggling to clear my thoughts, struggling to make myself believe that Father was dead. Never again would I hear his soft voice or his deep laugh.

It had happened so suddenly that I'd had no time to adjust to the fact that he wasn't here anymore. Only a week ago I had watched him leave the villa with his easy, swinging gait, saw the sun glistening on his thick white hair as he turned to lift a hand before disappearing from view toward the olive and orange trees below, which had been his joy and life for so many years.

My father, Edward Carlion, had left England befor I was born to come to Corsica to grow olives an oranges. Perhaps the idea had appealed to him because he had been a successful fruit farmer in England. He always said it had been in the nature of an experiment, that he had not intended staying here for more than a few years. He had not taken into account the fascination of Corsica and soon he was completely hooked on the peace and beauty of the island.

My mother had died when I was only three years old. I scarcely remembered her. From that time, my father and I were close companions, and as soon as I was old enough, I helped him run the estate. Now I had to get used to the fact that he was gone forever. The whole idea was too big for weeping. Life as I knew it had been shattered in the short space of a week. The business had been as much mine as his; now, as I stood staring down at the seemingly endless stretch of olive groves, I felt utterly lonely.

Mario pulled up with the car. He got out and smiled his quiet smile at me, took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Things will be better when Master Marcus arrives," he said, then nodded as I slid into the driver's seat.

I thought of Marcus and was conscious of a swift resentment. Marcus hadn't been home for over ten years. I wasn't quite fifteen when he and Father had had the row that had ended with my brother storming from the house, never to return. Why should he care that Father was dead? They hadn't seen each other since Marcus was twenty-one. Now he was an attorney, working with a London firm, established, with a life of his own. He had never visited, never written—never inquired in any way about us or the estate. In fact, I thought, with no little bitterness as I eased the car onto the main road that led to the airport, he had not even bothered to speak to me in person when I had phoned him to tell him of Father's death. It had been his secretary who had taken my message and then, a day later, had called back to say that Mr. Carlion would be arriving at Bastia Airport, with the time and flight number.

I had never known what the quarrel between Marcus and Father had been about. I had asked Father many times, but each time his response had been the same: He would look at me with suddenly sad eyes and, shaking his head, say, "Not now, Susan. Someday, perhaps, but not now."

I remembered what my father had said just before he died. He had been very weak but perfectly lucid. His eyes held that sad look I knew so well, but his slow words were wholly unexpected.

"I want you to—" he paused, wincing at a spasm of pain—"to try to find her."

Stupidly, I had asked, "Who? Who do you want me to find?"

But already his eyes had begun to cloud as he repeated weakly, "Find her."

They were the last words he had spoken. Five minutes later, he was dead. I went through everything to do with the estate but I found no clue. We had been so close, and I'd thought we had no secrets from each other, yet this baffled me, leaving me with a sense of helplessness.

I thought of that sad expression in his eyes as he had said the words. It was the same expression as when I asked him about the row with Marcus. Had this quest he wanted me to make any connection with that?

The sad present rushed back at me. I was alone now. The thought of running the groves on my own held no fears. I was completely familiar with all aspects of the business and knew myself to be capable of dealing with everything likely to happen.

I looked at my watch, and saw that I would have to hurry if I was to be in time to meet Marcus' plane.

I tried to visualize what our meeting would be like. Not too effusive, I imagined; after all, we were strangers to each other. As I parked the car, I wondered if I would recognize him; he certainly would not know me for I had only been a child when we had last met.

As it was not yet the season, there would not be many people on the plane, which should make recognition easier. In fact, I had no difficulty at all. I had forgotten how tall he was, and he towered above everyone as he came off the plane. I scrutinized him carefully as he walked across the tarmac; he was unaware of me as yet because I was standing with several other people behind the barriers. He looked rather pale and thin though there was an air of toughness about him, something I instantly remembered from the past. The heavy dark brows seemed to make the top part of his face too heavy for his slender jaw. I suddenly thought with a smile that I was being highly critical and that most people would probably think him handsome. I took myself to task; I must at least try to be fair and not start off by being antagonistic. I reminded myself that whatever my own ideas on the subject, I had no real knowledge of what had taken place between Father and Marcus, though I had always assumed that the fault must be my brother's. Finally, I saw him looking round for me. Twice I saw him look directly at me, then away again. My face rang no bell for him, which was not surprising.

I went toward him, and he watched me until I was within a few feet of him before recognition dawned. Then he smiled, entirely changing the severity of his expression.

"You've changed."

"Yes—I was only fourteen."

We were making conversation and I realized that he felt as awkward as I. I led him to the car and he put his one case in the back.

As we drove he said, "I'd forgotten how lovely Corsica is—the scent of the maquis too. It's easy to understand why this is called the Scented Isle."

We drove silently after that and it was only when we were nearly home that Marcus mentioned Father.

"What happened?"

"He cut his hand. It became infected with a rare virus which got into his bloodstream too fast to beat." I tried to keep my voice entirely matter-of-fact, but I was conscious of the slight break in it. Marcus turned to me.

"What will you do now?"

"I shall continue to run the estate the same as before."

There was no question in my mind about it. Marcus had been away so long that I did not think he would have any interest one way or the other.

I had forgotten about money.

He said now, "It might be better to sell."

I turned the car into the long drive up to the villa, stopped in front of the house, and turned to him in horror. "*Sell?* But I don't want to sell."

He leaned toward the door handle and turned it.

"But *I* might."

His words, soft and quiet, reverberated in my head as if he had shouted them.

Standing by the car, he leaned in to fetch his case, waiting until I reached him before saying, "Had you forgotten that I am his son?"

I suddenly realized what a complete fool I was being. Although I had not consciously thought about it, I suppose I had been assuming that because Marcus had cut himself off from us I would inherit the estate and everything on it. With a feeling of horror, I realized my mistake.

I didn't speak until after we had entered the villa. I was still too busy trying to think straight, still angry at making such a fool of myself. I turned toward him as he stood in the middle of the room.

"I think I *had* almost forgotten. Since you never behaved like a son, perhaps that isn't so surprising."

"Father never asked me to come back."

I stared, astonished. "*Asked* you? Why should he? It was you who walked out. Or have you forgotten?" My voice reflected the contempt I was feeling.

His heavy brows came down sharply. "You remember? The row, I mean."

I only knew what I had been told, and that was very little indeed—merely that Father and Marcus had had such a bitter disagreement that Marcus had walked out of the house and never returned. I moved impatiently.

"I only know what I've been told. I was away at school, remember?"

"And what were you told?"

I shrugged, "That you and Father had a disagreement and afterward you left home."

"That's all?"

"That's all," I answered firmly and again I saw him frown as he stood looking down at the ground.

After a moment, he asked, "Then you never knew what the row was about?"

I shook my head. "Father would never tell me."

"I see."

Suddenly, I wanted to stop this rather odd conversation, I walked toward the drink tray. "What would you like? There's whisky, gin, or sherry."

"Sherry, please."

He answered as if his mind was on something else, and I was conscious of a feeling of unease as we took our drinks out to the patio. He strolled to the edge, looking down.

"He increased the estate, didn't he?"

"Yes, it's more than twice the size now."

"And from the look of it, I imagine very successful?"

"Yes, we've done very well the last few years. There are olives as well, you know."

"His Will?" Marcus asked after a moment. "Have you looked at it?"

I made a helpless sort of gesture with my hands—silly, I suppose Marcus would have called it. "I don't know. I haven't opened it yet. I—I couldn't bear to."

"Don't worry. We'll do it together after lunch. Now let's talk of something else. Tell me about Corsica—what are the people like? What is it like living here? You seem to love it. You seem to be satisfied with your life."

He had offered me a temporary way out and, until Francine came to tell me that lunch was ready, I answered the many questions he asked. It was a subject which enthralled me and, carried away by my enthusiasm, I found a momentary release from my misery.

We continued talking through lunch, and I was aware that we were keeping everything neutral for as long as possible, though I knew that the moment of reckoning was coming uncomfortably close.

Returning to the patio for coffee, we were met by a loud thumping noise which was Mac's tail on the floor, welcoming us, or, at least, me. He stood up and I introduced him.

"I didn't know you had a Great Dane," Marcus said as he laid a hand on the bony head. I watched Mac. He was a good judge of character. He lifted his head to examine the newcomer. After a moment's contemplation, he wagged his tail and went to lie down again.

I said, "Of course, you didn't know. Mac is after your time." There were a lot of other things Marcus wouldn't know about.

I was trying to summon enough courage to fetch Father's Will, but I was to have a temporary reprieve, because I heard voices on the drive and two people came into view. I stood up to welcome them and introduce Marcus.

"This is my brother, Marcus—Marcus, these are my kind neighbors, Marie Kingston and her daughter Lise."

"You *are* a surprise," Marie said in her direct way. "I didn't even know that Susan had a brother."

I said quickly. "No, we haven't met for ages. Marcus is fully occupied as a lawyer in London. He has only come now to—" I hesitated, then finished smoothly, "to help me because of what's

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I love thee—I love thee
'Tis all that I can say;
It is my vision in the night,
My dreaming in the day.

Thomas Hood
I Love Thee

happened.”

The Kingstons were old friends. Marie, and Ric, her husband, were more or less contemporary with my father. Their estate adjoined ours and they had come to the island some years ago. I had always been very fond of Marie. Her round, pleasant face and kind brown eyes reflected her nice nature and I had always rather wondered at her apparent adoration of Ric, for, undoubtedly, he had a roving eye. He was handsome, and I suppose many women would consider him attractive.

As for Lise, we had always got on well, although we did not have much in common, her chief interest being men. She was certainly rather lovely with her blue eyes and corn-colored hair and a skin which tanned to perfection. I saw now that she had scarcely taken her eyes off Marcus since their arrival, and noticed with some amusement that he seemed totally unaware of it as he talked to Marie.

“We haven’t come to stay, dear,” Marie said to me, “only to see if there is anything we can do for you. Ric told me to tell you that if there is any help needed on the estate, you have only to ask.”

“Please, thank Ric. There are no difficulties at present, but I will remember his kind offer.”

After they left, I explained that the Kingston’s estate was quite near ours, and, immediately, Marcus said thoughtfully that Ric might be a possible buyer. I felt myself stiffen angrily but managed to control my temper.

I stood up and went to the door. “I’ll fetch the Will.”

“If you’re sure you feel up to it—if not, it can wait until tomorrow.”

I shrugged. “It has to be done, it may as well be now.”

When I returned with it, I hesitated a moment before handing it to Marcus. He took it without comment and, going over to the desk, slit the envelope. I was conscious of the beating of my heart as I waited.

Marcus began to read. “I bequeath one quarter of the Eleanor Estate to my son Marcus. Three quarters of the said estate and, except for the legacies stated below, everything else of which I am possessed, go to my beloved Susan who has given me so much happiness.”

Marcus continued without any expression to read out the legacies which Father had left to those who had served him so well during the years, but I scarcely heard. Three-quarters for me. One-quarter for Marcus. He would be very angry, for he obviously expected something very different, but I felt no sympathy; surely, the Eleanor Estate had nothing to do with him, surely it belonged to Father and myself, the two people who had worked to make it what it was today.

I was suddenly aware of the silence in the room. Marcus had put the Will down on the desk and was looking at me oddly. “And that’s it,” he said at length, “except for this.” He tapped an envelope against the palm of his hand, then lifted it and, before handing it to me, read, “‘For Susan, to be opened only after my death.”

“But what—?” Puzzled, I began to slit it open.

“Wait, Susan,” Marcus said, stepping over to me. “I believe I know what is in there, and before you open it, perhaps I should tell you something.”

But I was too overcome with excitement; I already had the letter in hand, and was scanning Father’s familiar handwriting. It was almost as though . . . then I began to read the words that pulled my whole life out from under me:

“My dearest girl,

“This is probably the most difficult letter I have ever had to write, perhaps because I am trying to excuse myself for something which most people would consider inexcusable.”

I frowned. What could he possibly mean?

“We have been so close over the years,” the letter continued, *“that perhaps it will be difficult for you to fully grasp what I must now tell you. I shall try to be as much to the point as I can be.*

“You see, Susan, you are not my daughter—not my daughter in the sense that I am your real father. Certainly, I have always thought of you as a daughter and I could not have loved any daughter more than I have loved you, but . . .”

The words blurred through my tears of shock and outrage. I looked up for Marcus, but he had left the room. Trying to grasp the horror of all this, I shook my head, then read:

“. . . but always, in my mind and heart,” he had written, *“there has been an almost unbearable burden of guilt for the way you came to us. You see, when Margaret went to England to have the baby—and then lost it—she was terribly distraught, not at all in her right mind. She stole an infant, from another woman. You, my precious Susan, had been left by your own mother—whoever she is—in your carriage, apparently for a few minutes, and Margaret, beside herself with grief, took you and brought you here as her own, rather than face the fact that her own child had been stillborn.*

“You may imagine my horror when she returned with a baby in her arms. Even then I did not understand the enormity of what

she had done. I saw when I met her at the airport that she was in a very nervous state and far from normal. She seemed not to realize what she had done, and when I questioned her she became quite unbalanced. I tried to talk to her quietly, explaining that I must contact the English police but she kept saying she would die if the baby was taken from her. I thought that by the next day, when she was rested and in her own home, she would be normal enough to know that the baby must be returned to the mother. I was wrong. The longer she was with you, the more determined she was to keep you. I tried to be patient and to make her see reason. In the end I told her that I could not agree to what she had done and that the baby must be returned to the mother. Again, she threatened to kill herself.

"She was terribly frail, and her whole life was centered around you. I loved her very much. What could I do?

"You have given me so much joy that I didn't deserve. If it is possible, please find your mother and try to make her understand. She has haunted me all my life. Margaret had not wanted our friends on Corsica to know about our baby's death, saying she wanted to tell them herself when she returned. Perhaps even then, she intended to do what she carried out later.

"I can only hope that knowing me, you will understand why I made such a terrible decision for Margaret's sake. Thank you again for all the happiness we've had together."

I don't know how long I sat there, staring into space, but after a while I was aware that I was not alone. Marcus had come back into the room and was looking down at me.

"I don't imagine I need guess at what was in the letter," he said softly.

I tried to stand, then sank back into the chair. "You know?" was all I could say.

He nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," he said. "Really sorry. I thought he might have told you some time ago. I can see now that he never had been able to find the courage."

I leapt from my chair, flooded with a rush of anger. "What do you mean, 'find the courage'?" A thousand thoughts and emotions crowded in on me, and I felt the room spinning.

He came to me, taking my arm. "Come and sit down. You look as if you might faint." He led me to a chair and I sank into it feeling as if all the bones had left my body.

"But it *isn't* true. It *can't* be true."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

For a moment, Marcus didn't say anything. He was standing looking down at me with something very like regret in his eyes.

After a silence he asked, "You want to hear what I know about it?"

"Yes, you *have* to tell me now."

"Yes," he agreed gravely, "I have to tell you now."

I watched him as he sat silently, obviously marshalling his thoughts into some sort of coherence. Outside, the quiet was suddenly broken by the braying of a donkey. Something which I would probably not even have noticed but which now seemed suddenly important. Marcus sat forward.

"I was eight when you were born, and mother, because she had nearly lost her life when she had me, went to England to be under the care of a specialist until after the baby was born." He paused, frowning. "When she returned to Corsica, Father went to the airport to meet her, and I can remember the excitement I felt at the thought of Mother coming home. I thought, you see, that everything would be happy again."

Marcus stopped abruptly, staring silently at the floor, brows drawn together. I knew that the scene he had just described was vivid in his mind.

"I knew there was something wrong the moment they got out of the car. Father held the door for her, then walked away, straight into the house, and I knew that instead of being pleased and happy as I'd expected, he was more angry than I'd ever seen him."

Again I heard the unhappy braying of the donkey as I waited for Marcus to continue.

"That night, after I was in bed, I heard them quarrelling, their voices getting louder and louder. I crept halfway down the stairs, and I heard Father say, 'You can't do this. I won't have it here. It must go back.' And Mother, 'I won't, I won't, and anyway, I can't,' and there was something about her voice which frightened me. It was very shrill, as if she couldn't control it. Father said something I couldn't hear and I crept further downstairs. Mother was shouting, 'She's mine now. You can't take her away from me. I'll die if you take her away.' "

He looked at me. "I heard it all that night."

"But you were only eight years old," I said.

"What difference does that make?" he asked. "I was capable of understanding plain English, and God knows, it was plain enough."

"What did they say to you when they knew you had overheard?"

"They *didn't* know. I never told them." There was a curious weight in the words, as if during the years, that knowledge had been almost too heavy to bear, and suddenly, I thought of that small boy and what that burden must have done to him.

After a long silence, during which I tried to steady my whirling thoughts, Marcus said in a hard voice, "And Father was as guilty as she. He let her keep you, so he was as much to blame."

I sat silently, trying to equate this with what I knew of Father—or rather, of the man who was not my father. Somehow, it didn't fit.

My mother, I suddenly realized with a horrible jolt. My world had been so completely turned upside down that I no longer felt capable of judging anyone or anything.

I said bitterly, "She didn't live long to enjoy me, did she?"

"No. I don't think she ever really recovered from the shock of losing her own baby. She had a breakdown, and—"

I broke into what he was saying. "Perhaps that was the reason Father allowed her to keep—" I hesitated, "to keep me."

He looked at me as if he were considering that viewpoint for the first time.

"Maybe, but think of that poor girl

losing her baby—never knowing what had happened to you."

"Couldn't they have written—anonymously, I mean?"

"Mother always insisted that she didn't know whose baby you were. She just saw you outside a shop and ran off with you."

It seemed an unthinkable thing to do, but her brain couldn't have been normal when she did it. Why, I wondered, was I making excuses for this woman who turned out not to be my mother? Any more than Edward Carlion was my Father.

Perhaps it was because for the first time in my life I was facing total confusion. I knew now what it felt like to have the whole basis of my life swept away. Perhaps she had felt the same when she knew she had to face returning to Corsica without the baby she had wanted.

I looked miserably at this man who must have hated me all his life, who had been made to believe that he had a baby sister only to find that the sister was nothing but a nameless waif stolen by his mother.

"And the row? The row you and Father had—that must have been about this?"

He frowned. "Curiously enough, only indirectly—to begin with, anyway. He had been reading he local paper. There was a case of a stolen baby recorded in it. I saw the headlines as he read. I saw his face, too. Suddenly, he realized that I was watching him. He threw down the paper, saying, 'What a terrible thing.'"

Marcus stopped speaking, his mouth tight. "Somehow, the way he said it was the last straw. Knowing what I did, it sounded sanctimonious—insincere. Why did he say this case was so terrible when he had allowed exactly the same thing himself? It sickened me, and I told him what I had known all those years. I told him what I thought of a man who could do that and live with it as he had done." He made a gesture with both hands. "And then, I walked out."

"That nearly broke his heart."

Marcus didn't answer, and it saddened me even more to see his hard expression.

During the days before the funeral, I had plenty of time to struggle with the problem confronting me. There were many complications, not least of which was what our friends on the island were to be told. I had already introduced Marcus to the Kingstons as my brother. All the workers on the estate thought of me as Edward Carlion's daughter. I dreaded dispelling the idea. Many of them had known me since I had been a baby, and many would remember Marcus before he left Corsica. What was I going to do?

I realized with an unpleasant jolt that I no longer knew what to call the man I still thought of as Father. When I pointed this out to Marcus, he gave it careful thought, finally saying, "Well, he *was* a father as far as you were concerned. If you want to go on calling him that, do so. I certainly don't mind."

I said tentatively, "Everyone here believes I am his daughter—that you are my brother, after all."

Marcus shrugged indifferently. "Then, let them go on thinking so. What harm can it do? And it should make things easier while you are still here."

Suddenly, I felt cold. I knew what he meant by that. He still wanted us to sell the estate.

I swallowed hard and decided to have it out with him on the subject then and there. I'd been through so much these past few days, it felt as though I could face just about anything.

"Marcus," I began, "I know you're not entirely happy that . . . Father left you only a quarter of the estate. And I know you want to sell your share—"

He had been standing with his back to me, staring out the windows that overlook the orange groves, and now he spun about. "Yes," he said, obviously controlling his voice, "I want to sell." I felt my face burn at his words, but he was speaking too rapidly for me to interrupt. "I am not so naive as to think that my share would bring nearly the price it would if I were to sell it—along with your shares—on the open market. If you could only see the good sense of selling!"

"You don't understand, do you? To you it's all just land and trees and bushes growing on it which bring in a certain amount of money." I turned to the window, stretching out my hand and ordering him to join me. "Come and stand here and try to see what I see—what Father saw."

Surprisingly, he turned to the window again as I continued. "The groves are terraced—down the slopes you can see. There are a lot of olives—oranges are not easy to grow on Corsica but Father developed a strain which does well in this area, and there are three times the number of trees there were when he first came. They've grown and flourished because of all the loving care he gave them." I paused. "The loving care we both gave them. Don't you understand, they don't just comprise an estate, but a way of life?"

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Love is not getting, but giving;
Not a wild dream of pleasure, and
A madness of desire—oh, no,
Love is not that—it is
Goodness, and honor, and peace and
Pure living.

Henry van Dyke
Little Rivers:
A Handful of Heather

I stopped abruptly, appalled to hear my own voice saying such unlikely things to this man who obviously had no sympathy or understanding. Never before had I made such an impassioned speech, nor, I was certain, had any speech fallen on stonier ground. It was received in complete silence, and I was very conscious of Marcus' tall figure standing beside me. He turned to stare at me, but still I didn't move, fighting to overcome the first tears which threatened. It was as if this outburst had unfrozen something inside me. Just looking down at all that beauty which meant so much to me made me realize that what I had said was the literal truth. It *was* my life. I had nothing else.

I heard Marcus sigh as he moved from the window, but I didn't turn. He was the last person I would want to see my tears. It seemed a long time before he broke the silence. When he did, any of the compassion that had been in his voice earlier had evaporated. His words were crisp, clipped of any sentiment. "My way of life does not allow room for even a quarter of this place," he said, "and whether I have to sell it alone, or with your share, I *shall* sell."

"This is my home. It's my life," I said icily. "If you begin to divide it up, selling off a piece of it . . ." Tears burned my eyes, and I couldn't continue.

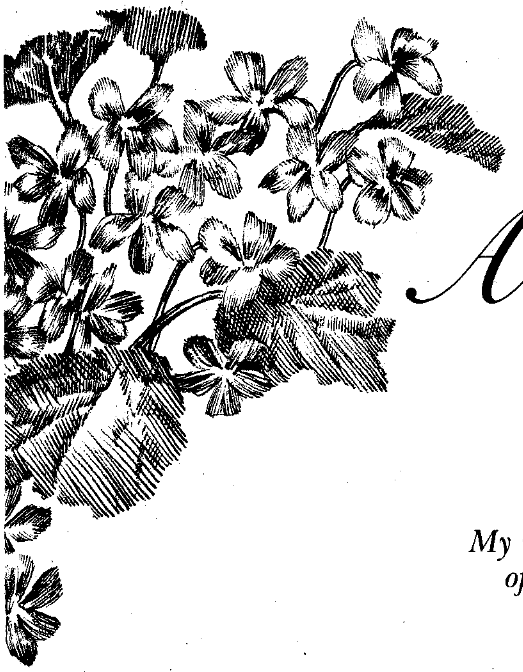
"How can you feel that way now, after all you've learned?" he asked, his voice as hard as a stone.

I started to speak but was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. I went to answer it, grateful to hear Marie's voice.

"Ric and I wondered if you and Marcus would feel like coming over for coffee this evening. It must be rather dreary for you both at the moment."

"That's a very kind thought, Marie—yes, we'd like to very much. You're

(Continued on page 70)



A Bouquet of Violets

My vacations with Marnie had always been a joy of my youth, until that strange summer . . .

In less than half an hour, I shall be at Netherton, paying my last respects, as they say, to Marnie. I pity the poor unfortunates who haven't had a Marnie in their lives. And I regret that, because of distance and the modern pace of living, my own two children haven't known her as I did.

My childhood would have lost half its color, half of its dimension had Marnie not been a part of it. Yet it's all so long ago now, and I am aware of so many changes around me. Life is speeding by and another landmark has been passed and left behind. Marnie is gone.

The countryside is also changing now, and I am driving between tall, sentinel rows of poplars. They sway in the wind and seem to whisper to me, reminding me that Netherton is just ahead. A warning to me to get my emotions under control and behave in a proper manner, befitting a successful authoress, wife and mother. I check my watch again and see that I can afford five minutes for a cigarette and my own last-minute private homage to Marnie.

I park the car in a field gateway next to a grassy knoll and get out, stretching my legs. A soft, warm breeze touches my face. It is Netherton weather. I can almost hear the drone of the tractors, the whine of the baling machines. Even the grass brushing against my legs seems special, soft and feathery, evoking images of picnics in long green meadows, hedgerows of blackberries ripening in almost royal magnificence, bees hanging heavily over dew-filled roses.

My holidays at Netherton were always special, looked forward to for eleven months of the year. They remained inviolate, ever-precious even in the face of the one-upmanship of my school friends who jetted out to Sardinia, or Minorca or the Algarve. I listened and exclaimed at their suntans, secretly waiting for August, for Netherton and Marnie.

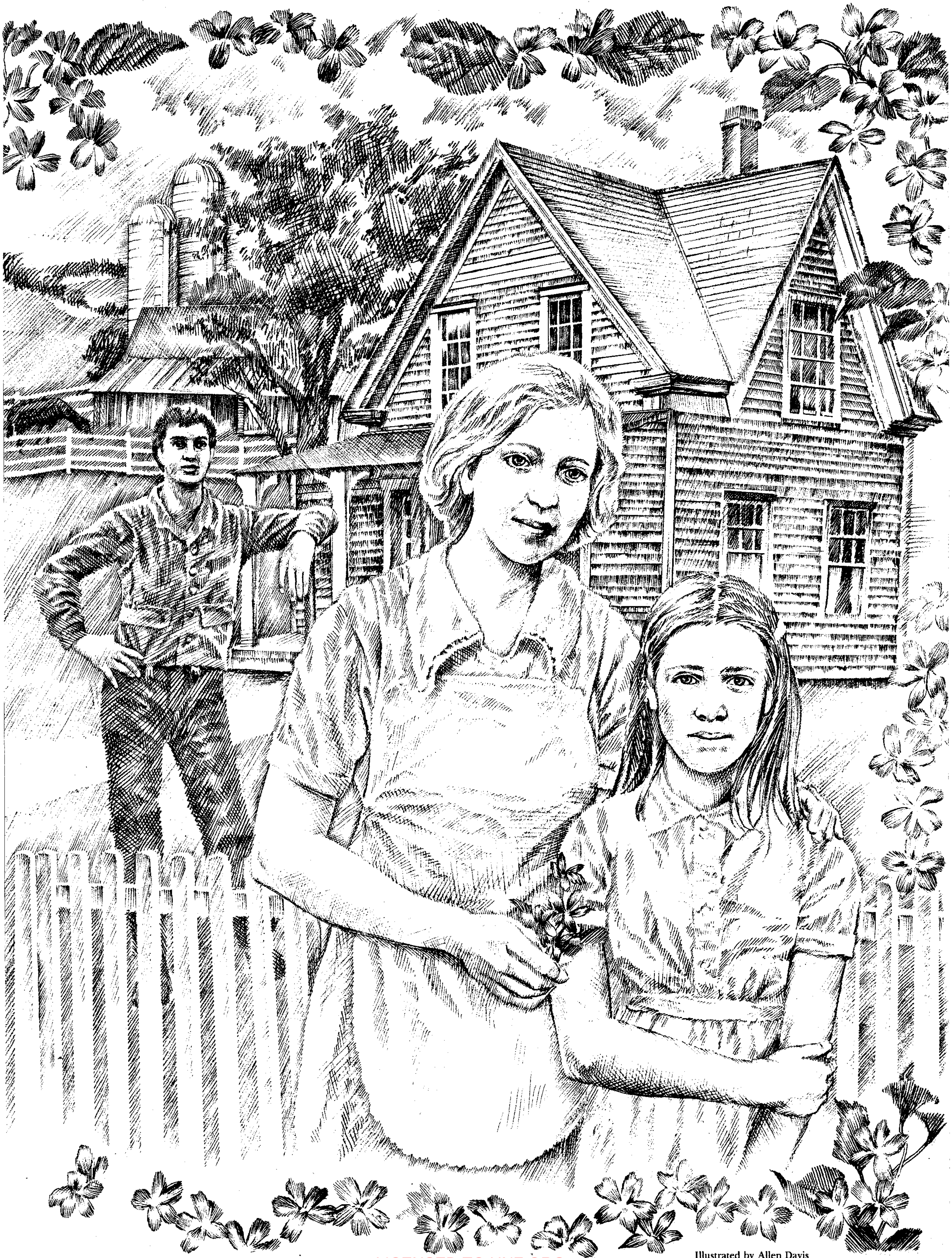
A short story by Greta Nelson

Marnie had been in service in my mother's family home and was, I suppose about my mother's age. My mother and Marnie had a very close relationship, and my mother had been bridesmaid for Marnie when she married Amos Fenwick. The Fenwicks had farmed at Netherton for generations, and the village agreed that young Marnie Donaldson had done well for herself, exchanging the confines of domestic service for a sizeable farm and house of her own, not to mention a husband.

Amos was a big, gentle man with cobalt blue eyes and large hands and feet. He adored Marnie. His adoration was simple and silent, and showed itself in his total consideration for her welfare. And in his limitless generosity, so that the large, sprawling farmhouse emanated warmth, care and well-being.

I started going to Netherton when I was about eight, and for the whole of each journey I would feel an ache inside me, a suppressed excitement I suppose, which only began to ease when we were safely within the grassy, rutted drive leading up to the farm. I would shoot up to my room, a slope-roofed attic, filled with the smell of lilac blossom and covered with wallpaper sweetly awash with daisies. I can remember looking across the sheep-dotted fields, hearing the exquisite lowing of Amos's cows and thanking God that I had a whole two weeks of heaven ahead of me.

Sometimes my mother stayed with me, and Marnie and she would talk for hours. Marnie was different when my mother was there. She seemed somehow to shed her years, even her dignity a little, as though she was a girl again. Long-haired, bright-eyed, on the threshold of whatever life had to offer. It didn't matter to me that I had no knowledge of the things they talked about. It was enough to be in the big, red-bricked kitchen, my eyes devouring the familiar, fire-lit brasses, my nose wrinkling in approval at the comforting aroma of the hams and herbs hanging from the dark oak beams.



Illustrated by Allen Davis

I think it was the sheer simplicity of Netherton holidays which was so wonderful. Long, golden days of quiet sunshine, Amos out in the far-reaching fields, Marnie and I jam-making or sewing dolls' clothes or walking for miles along the grass thick with sweet-smelling clover. Time seemed to stand still, any problem seemed to evaporate, nothing ever changed. Not until that awful year when everything changed, so that Netherton was never quite the same again.

I was thirteen, and was delirious with joy because my parents had gone off on a lecture tour of the States. I was to stay six whole weeks at Netherton. My suitcases had been sent ahead, I actually traveled down alone, and Marnie met me at the station. She enveloped me in the usual hug, but there was a perceptible air of detachment about her, a distraction of interest which chilled me. She looked younger, and she'd done her hair differently. It was brushed straight and long, tied at the nape of her neck with a brown velvet ribbon. I suppose she looked almost beautiful.

My uneasiness evaporated a little on the way to the farm. She chattered a lot and told me that Amos had damaged his back and had to stay in bed for a few weeks.

"So you'll have to lend a hand, Gilly, my love," she said smilingly. "I said to Amos just this morning, we shan't have to worry once Gilly's here."

My eyes were enormous and uneasiness was threatening again. How on earth would we manage without Amos? I pictured him sitting high on his tractor or striding over the fields, his sheepdogs at his heels, with large, immensely capable hands. What would we do? My heart sank in my typical, childish distaste for change of any sort.

Marnie was still chatting. It seemed that they had been lucky enough to hire some casual labor, an itinerant farmer named Ethan.

My eyes grew round. "Ethan?" I asked.

Marnie laughed. "It is a bit poetic for a farmer, isn't it?" she said. "He's Welsh, and he actually does dabble in a bit of poetry. I don't pretend to understand it all, but it seems very good."

I glanced at her. "Mighty hot sun," I said, observing with curiosity the high color in her face.

Her eyes concentrated on the farm gateway. "It is a bit warm today." She looked at me then, and suddenly the barrier or whatever it was that was troubling me was swept away as she smiled as always.

"Welcome, my pet," she said. "It's lovely to see you again. Now come and say hello to Amos."

I spent quite a lot of time with Amos that first week because the brilliant sunshine which had welcomed me at Netherton station decided to play fickle, and the very next day the entire farm was sodden with unrelenting sheets of grey, depressing rain. The farm yard was awash with rivulets of water running from a leaky spout, and the countryside had a drenched, forlorn look. Ethan trudged up from the fields, a waterproof cape thrown over his shoulders. In the brooding, half-light of dusk, he looked for all the world like some latter-day Heathcliffe, as wild as his beloved Welsh mountains.

Marnie and I baked copiously in the kitchen, producing huge batches of fresh bread and cider cake and apple slice. She wore a new dress each day, shortened the hemlines and debated about having her hair cut.

"You couldn't!" I said in horror, looking at the smooth-as-silk fall of hair. "That would be unspeakable!"

Her voice was quiet but soft with satisfaction. "That's what Ethan says." She collected herself, "And Amos would never approve, of course."

I watched her curiously, wondering what was different about her. We still played cards together, and had long, nightly chats, and she asked all the right questions, but there was an unprecedented distrait quality in our relationship. As though she were asking out of duty, as though I had suddenly paled in significance.

I eyed the violets standing in the pretty glass jar on the massive dresser.

"I thought you didn't like picking wild flowers," I said. "I thought you said they looked better where they were meant to be, out in the fields and meadows, not stuck in a hot kitchen."

Marnie took another batch of bread out. "Ethan found them in the Well Fields. And they are beautiful. I could hardly tell him to go back and replant them, now could I?"

But I noticed that the violets were fresh every morning.

I played countless games of checkers and chess with Amos, and we tackled crosswords and puzzles until I felt I was back at school. I could tell how painful his back was, seeing the beads of sweat stand on his brow when a bad spasm took over. The doctor called twice a week and administered pills and lotions, and suggested a little more patience.

Amos would look out over the fields and I knew how much he longed to be there, in harness, in charge—in control of his own farm.

"This Ethan," he said to me one day as we stared down at an impossible chess board. "A good worker, would you say? Marnie seems to think so. She says I mustn't worry."

I moved a chess piece deliberately to give Amos the advantage. "Ethan.Yes, he seems fine. The animals like him. He's very gentle with them. And he's a worker, Amos."

Amos nodded back. "That's good." There was another silence, but I knew he wasn't finished with the subject.

"He writes poetry you know, Gilly. That must take talent—writing poetry. I don't know as I can even remember *learning* any, never mind writing it." He shook his head. "That must be nice, writing your own poetry."

I tossed my head and made another absurdly stupid chess move. "If you like that sort of thing." I was silently stunned at my duplicity, for in truth I was totally addicted to Pope and Dryden myself. But I felt that Amos needed any support or confidence he could find. He won the game at that precise moment, and I childishly overdid my pleasure and congratulations.

The sun made its re-appearance the next morning, and I plunged into my normal Netherton routine of collecting the eggs, talking to the geese, and watching Marnie milking the velvet-eyed cows in the cool, dark barn. She was wearing another new dress, as blue as a blackbird's egg. Her hair was shining and as bright as corn.

Marnie smiled at me. "It's good to see

the sun, Gilly. I'll take an hour off at lunchtime and we'll have a picnic down at the Reath. We'll take a rug, for the grass will still be damp."

There were never any better picnics in the whole world than the ones at Netherton Reath. It was a triangular shape of water edged with tall reedmaces and pale purple water irises, and the dragon flies hovered in their dozens, the bright flash of their blues and reds quite dazzling in the sunshine. Nearby were great hedgerows hung with clusters of blackberries, ready to fill our baskets and jugs. The Reath picnic was the favorite part of my holiday, and Marnie and I set off at twelve o'clock, carrying the hamper between us, along with various other bags transporting the rugs and raincoats just in case the weather broke again. We'd left Amos with his lunch and the papers, and I felt at peace with the world for perhaps the first time since my arrival. Everything seemed to be settling in its rightful place, and Marnie and I had two whole hours to ourselves.

But my euphoria was short-lived, for no sooner had we reached the meadow approaching the Reath than Ethan appeared, Glen and Moss at his heels. I eyed all three of them with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, and didn't greet the dogs as I normally did. Didn't they owe Amos any loyalty? Did they have to fawn about Ethan's feet as if he were their master?

Ethan strolled along with us and tried gently to tease me, but gave up in the face of my wooden expression. I saw him raise his eyebrows at Marnie, and I could tell she was displeased with me. I ran on in front, calling the dogs to me, and we arrived at the Reath, breathless and panting.

I sat on a smooth, sandstone rock and watched the other two coming down the slope. Ethan had taken the hamper, and he and Marnie were laughing and talking, and occasionally she would move her head so that her hair swung like a bright, beautiful rope of copper. A shaft of sunshine hit them suddenly, and a cold, dreadful hand squeezed my heart. They looked marvelous together, like some beautiful couple in an out-of-time painting. His slim, dark good looks were the perfect foil to her pink and white loveliness, and he was just that bit taller than she was. Their shared laughter rang out yet again, and I sharply nudged poor old Moss with an impatient, edgy foot. I knew I was scowling when they came up, and Marnie began opening the hamper.

"Will you join us?" she said, turning to Ethan and he made a great fuss and said he really shouldn't, but nevertheless almost immediately sat down on the grassy incline. I said I wasn't hungry yet and would explore the nearby plantation, and as I left I noticed that Marnie had brought three cups.

I wandered through the cool, dark undergrowth of the pine trees, gathering and discarding cones at a furious rate. The anger inside me frightened me, and I knew it was solely directed at Marnie. Why didn't she just tell him to get back to work. That this was our picnic, our territory, and that we didn't need strangers, didn't want them. I fought back the tears and gradually felt better and wandered back to the Reath, the morning air having gone to work on my taste buds, despite myself.

Full Circle

by M.E. Scott

With memorable smile and irrelevant name
down avenues of April you came
and spring was the same yet not the same.
Our thoughts, both silent and spoken,
were April petal open.

New suns in our eyes spilled honeyed heat
on words June jubilant and laughter fleet
as we sauntered down a summer street
intimate with rapport
we shared with no one before.

Then, letting some leaf-thin pride profane
an affinity almost predestined for pain,
we walked a separate autumn lane,
down shadowy stretches of mood
where winds of warning brood.

And whether by chance or by intent,
our two lanes crossed where loneliness bent
a road of remorse to circumvent
the wintry way of wrath
to another April path.

◆

Ethan was reading poetry, his own, I supposed. It was beautiful, as was his voice, and I was suddenly conscious of an awful, unfair comparison with Amos. Those meaningful, romantic words would sound absurd coming from Amos's lips.

Marnie was listening, watching him, and in that moment my anger against her evaporated, leaving in its place a terrible fear. The look on her face was unmistakable. Even to a thirteen-year-old, it was as transparent as glass, and I trembled for her. I'd never once seen her look at Amos in that way.

The picnic was actually quite good. Ethan and I talked about poetry and literature in general, and despite myself, I was drawn by his gentle, teasing ways and his young, good-looking face. I could see Marnie's rush of pleasure at the fact that I was behaving myself at last, and we all three spent half an hour having a blackberry-picking contest. I won by a mile, and little wonder, I thought, hearing the low, constant hum of conversation from the other side of the hedge.

The second and third weeks of my holidays were over before I knew it, and Amos was now allowed to sit in a chair. He was dreadfully restless, and for the first time that I could remember, he spoke sharply to Marnie.

The weather was behaving oddly again for that time of year, and there was a terrible tension in the air, as though a storm were brewing. The skies were a dark purple, traced here and there with fast-moving grey-tinged clouds, and the house seemed heavy and stifling.

I'd slipped out one evening just to wander over the familiar ground, scratch the saddle-backed pigs, and call sweet nothings to the milking herd. Then I'd wandered into the barn, sniffing the delights of the stacked hay, hearing the odd hen scratching for food. The quiet was intense, and I climbed the loft ladder and lay on the prickly bales of straw, listening to the wood pigeons on the eaves, the ring-collared doves.

I must have dozed, because I came to with a start and realized that I was in almost total darkness. The heavens had opened and the rain was drumming down on the corrugated roof, beating against the skylight. My left leg felt cramped because of the way I was lying, and I moved gingerly, stretching like a cat.

At that moment the barn door opened, and I heard them, Marnie and Ethan. They were laughing, out of breath, as though they had run for miles. Ethan said, "What a night! You're soaked, like some solitary woodland creature lost in a storm-tossed world."

He was half laughing, but there was something in his voice which made my heart almost cry out in protest. I lay there, my eyes shut tight, my face screwed up as if by shutting everything out, it would magically disappear. But the silence was worse than the words, and I rolled over carefully and squinted downwards.

He was standing close to Marnie, his hands cupping her glistening cheeks,

(Continued on page 94)

The Security of Emily Sargeant

What was security to Emily anyway? A fat bankroll or an extravagant bunch of flowers from a man who couldn't afford them?

When Emily Sargeant was nine years old Grandmother Sargeant gave her a bond. A savings bond.

"Hold on to it, Emily," she said. "That's your security."

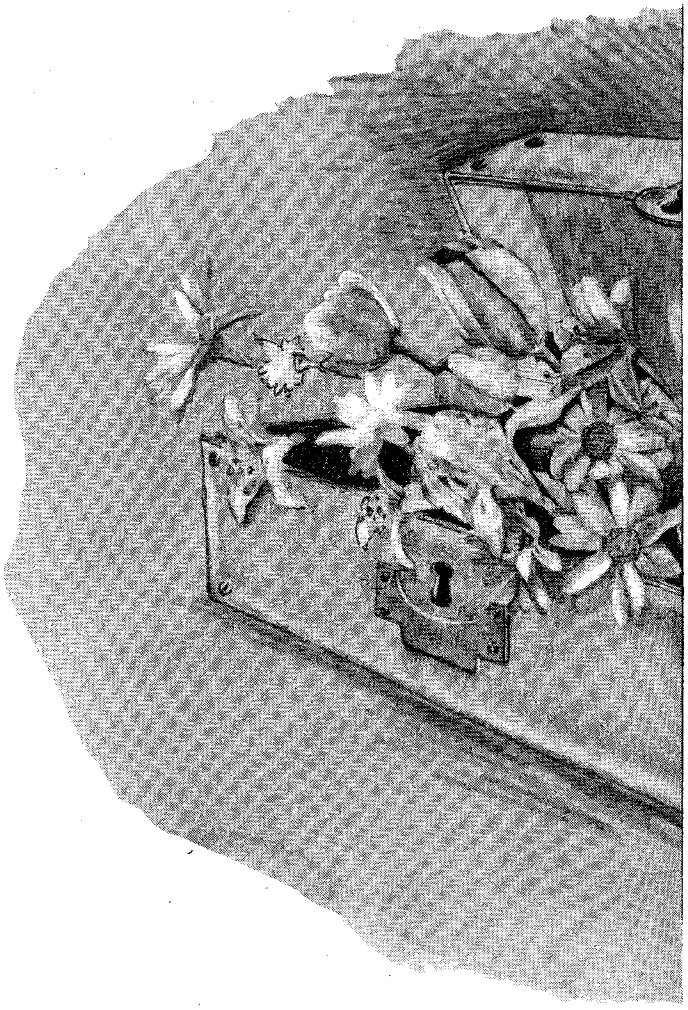
Emily held the paper in her small round hand and smiled her thanks. Then she kissed her grandmother on her leathery cheek. She was not quite sure what "security" meant, but she knew it was very important and had to do with "pensions" and old age.

As the years passed there were other bonds and papers, stock certificates and a savings book. Emily's father kept all of them in a black tin box with her initial painted on the lid.

"Hold on to them, Emily," he would say, shuffling them from hand to hand and tapping them on the table to bring them into line.

When Emily was sixteen years old she took a job in a bank. "Think of the security," her mother said in a voice as content as cream. She gazed at her daughter fondly, admiring her smooth brown hair, gentle brow and blue, unclouded eyes. Emily's small, capable hands were folded neatly and tucked away at waist level like doves at rest. If her left foot tapped in time to some distant music, it was barely noticeable.

Emily presented herself at the bank on a day in April when high white clouds cluttered the skies and daffodils stood chatting in the public park. It was dark inside the bank, leathered and brass-bound as the cabin of a ship. But Emily somehow felt safe there inside the gloom, anchored to her books, every penny accounted for. Though at times she still missed the out-of-doors; the April skies and spring flowers, and above all the crazy antics of the people, the animals.



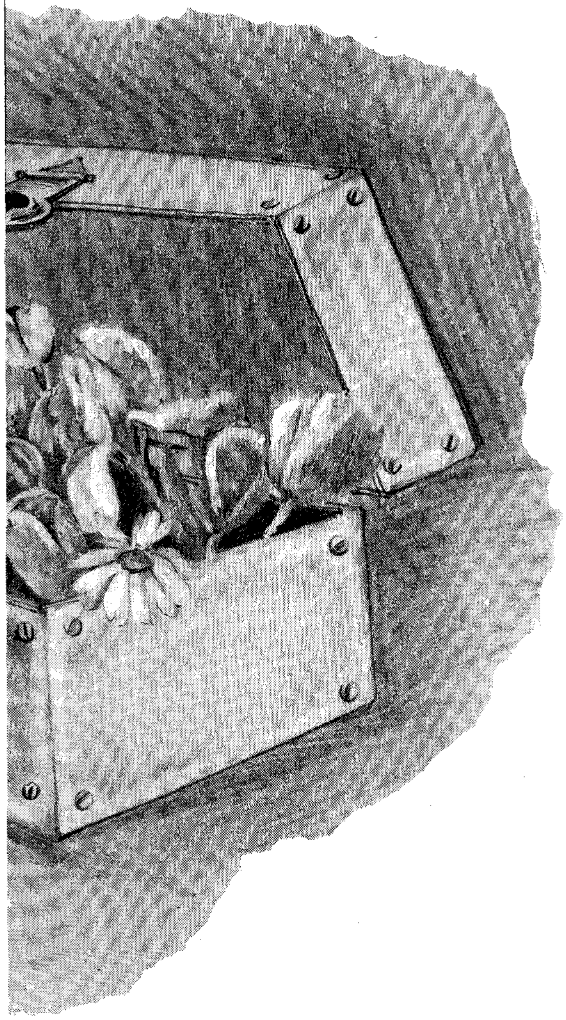
"You'll be the head teller one day," Grandmother Sargeant said, her tone implying that such an exalted position was the absolute right of any granddaughter of hers. Emily smiled a hesitant smile and kissed her grandmother affectionately. She was glad she had made them all happy. If she was shut away from the outside world, it seemed a small price to pay. And, every now and then, the outside world did creep in to brighten her day. Sometimes in the form of Michael McMahon, an inventor of sorts, a tinkerer, and some—the manager in particular—would say, a ne'er-do-well.

Emily's progress at the bank was slow and sure, like rising bread: clerk, teller and then head teller. As head

A short story by Denise Robertson

teller she occupied the end window—the most important—and could, at her own discretion, roam around the premises. She gave all her customers her best attention and unravelled their queries like knots in wool.

One day Emily's father approached her and said, "I think you should have these now," and handed her the black tin box. "You are twenty-five years old and a sensible girl. Hang on to these. They're your security."



Year after year the bells rang and the customers sighed with relief at the sight of Emily's helpful face.

"You are most kind," said Mr. Bannerjee, manager of Smith's general store.

"Thanks awfully," said Mrs. Gillis-White, who lived on alimony checks.

"What's the mood today?" queried Michael McMahon, rolling his eyes in the direction of the manager's door.

McMahon's visits were frequent and painful for all concerned. "Really, Miss Sargeant," the manager would say, wiping his brow. "Really, the fellow's impossible. What with his hare-brained schemes and his chronic extravagance. . . ." And Emily would smile, and get on with her trial balance.

When Emily was thirty-two, Grandmother Sargeant passed away. "She's looked after you, Emily," her father said. Emily smiled and kissed his cheek, noting with surprise how thin it had become. Now the black tin box fairly bulged with security, but Emily had taken to gardening and cared more for her tulips than any paper or bond.

On fine days as she walked home after work she would pass the public gardens in order to compare the city's landscaping efforts with her own. She was a neat, round woman now, with pink cheeks and brown hair. She wore soft woolen suits in muted colors, and beneath them her body was as smooth as the lavender soap with which she washed. Her smile flashed on and off like some small woodland animal, peeping and hiding by turns, and there was a sweetness about her that defied the shrill clamour of the constant exchange of money which surrounded her.

Sometimes Emily met McMahon in the park. He would tip his shabby brown cap and fall in beside her. "What's the mood today?" he would say with a twinkle. "Any chance of a bit of a loan?"

He knew a great deal about flowers, even their Latin names. And for every flower he had a story. "That's beautiful," said Emily when he told her of the blind boy who, when Philadelphus petals fell upon his eyelids, could see. McMahon brought her slips and cuttings wrapped in newspapers and guaranteed to grow. Her garden blossomed along with their friendship, giving no indication of the storm to come.

"McMahon!" the manager gasped and grew pale at the very word.

"The fellow's a scoundrel," her father thundered. "I should have warned you about his sort."

"Now you'll never have security," her mother moaned, and shed a tear for a daughter suddenly gone to the dogs.

"You know what he's after," the entire world chortled, and winked its skeptical eye.

They were married on a warm July day, Emily in a dress of grey chiffon and McMahon in a splendid suit with hand-stitched lapels. "What does it matter who pays?" said Emily when he chided her for her extravagance. "Isn't that what money is for?"

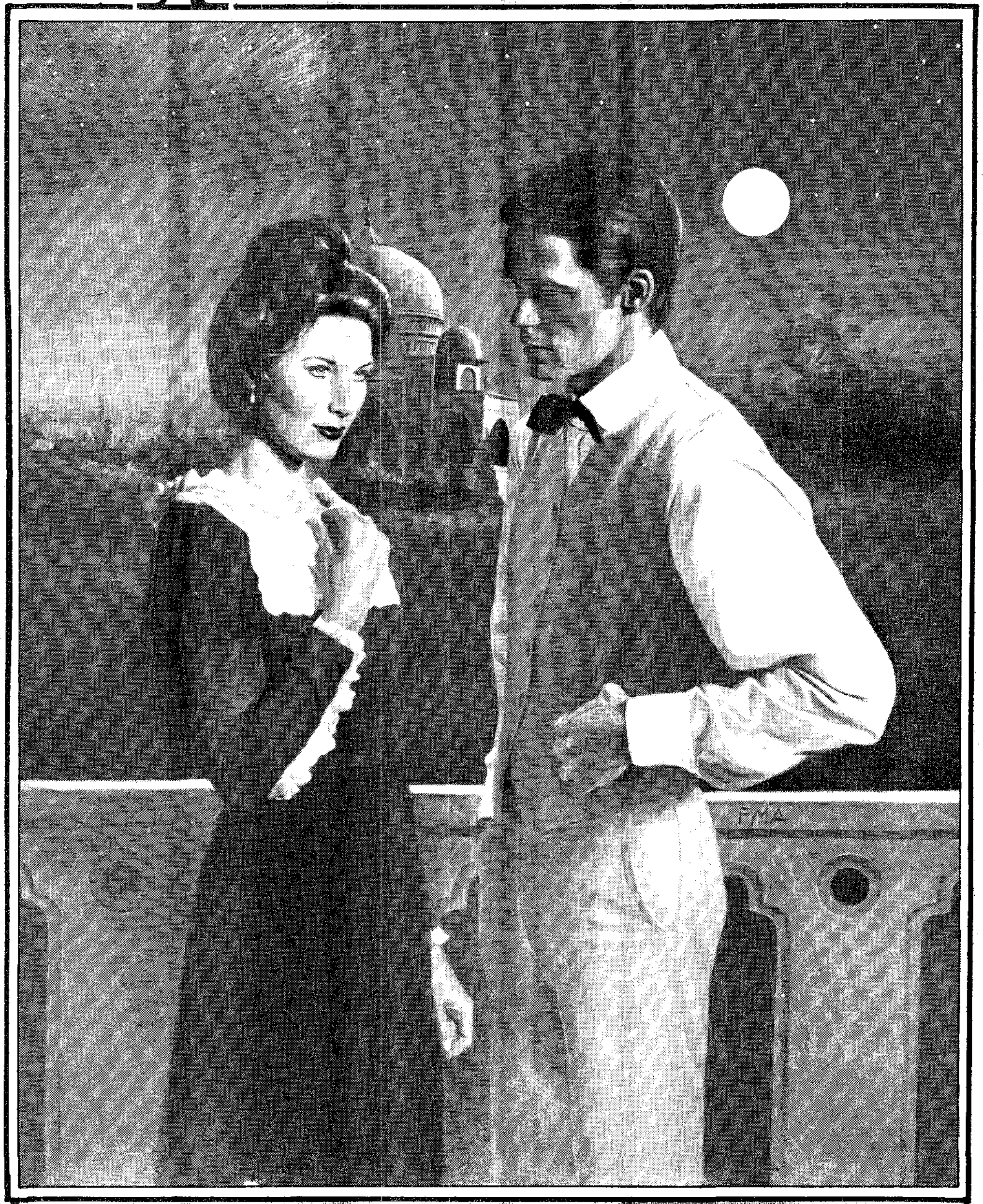
He was a tender lover, touching her body as he might have handled an extra-special flower. "I love you, Emily McMahon," he whispered in the friendly dark, and she knew he spoke the truth.

She bought him a car and a share in a shop and paid for a patent on his latest good idea. The black tin box was soon empty, and Emily's mother wept for what might have been.

But Emily was learning for the first time what "security" really meant. For her it was the year's first rose, brought fresh to her on a summer morning. It was a warm body entwined with hers on a cold winter's night. Yes, her security was at once so big that it could not be fully comprehended, and yet so small that it fit snugly just beneath her heart. Where she could keep it safe for all the time to come. ◆

Illustrated by Jerry Cable

THE JADE PAGODA



Illustrated by Franco Accornero

BY
BETTY HALE HYATT

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

It had not come easy for me to know that I was twenty-seven, already a spinster with no great prospects of marriage, and with very little money of my own because an albatross in the form of a crumbling old manor house in Cornwall hung around my neck, with death duties eating away at the money my brother Gavin and my father had provided.

Two years after our father's brave march out of the ill-fated city of Kabul and his subsequent death with his whole regiment, Gavin had insisted that I come out of Kashmir and keep house and company for him. I welcomed it with relief, and arrived in Srinagar just as winter was leaving and spring entered, barely a year after his invitation.

The lake was at its loveliest; it was the most exciting, momentous happening in my adult life, coming to Kashmir, the remote kingdom of lakes set in the Himalayas. Gavin had leased a beautifully built house of rosy brick and timber set in an orchard overlooking Dal Lake near the Moghul gardens, and in it he had been extravagant beyond my imagination with the lovely carpets of silk and wool on the floors, and china imported from Peiping.

While Gavin was in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, on his missions, which I knew were secret, I kept house for my brother, and entertained. I was glad to get acquainted with my brother for the first time in our lives; he was three years older than I, and had left my life at a very early age. He was exciting, always living on the high keen tightrope of adventure as a top-secret agent for the British Intelligence; he was handsome too, and I suspected that he'd had his share of lovely ladies, but he'd never married.

When the news of his disappearance reached me, I knew no little fear, but as the weeks wore on, and I remained in the house above the lake, that fear faded. I had the family of Mohammud Gulag, who owned the house, and who had respected Gavin, to look after me.

I watched the high summer come in, knowing the days were idyllic and mine for an indefinite time, and I just let them ride by. The early rice was already in the fields, and on the lower terraces of the mountains the farmers were cutting it, their sickles flashing in the midday sun like mirrors. Down on the lake, the willows fringed and shaded the canal and the waterways where the little kingfisher lived, and the lotuses were in flower, those great deep pink cups, resting on the giant flat green leaves, so thick and cool that they held pools of dew all day, glittering like diamonds at sunset.

In that setting, Mr. Tobias Roberts paid his unexpected call with the letter from Lord Gordon Harding in hand. After he had made himself known, we sat on the cool airy porch out of the hot sun, facing the lake below the village beyond my terraced gardens. Mohammud brought a jug of fresh lemonade, then left us.

With a glass of the cool drink in his hands, Mr. Roberts waited in unperturbed calmness, assured that everything was under control now that he was here. It was but for me to begin reading the letter he had given me.

"My dear Miss Butler," the letter began sweepingly.

"On behalf of my sincere apologies, however belated they are, I am sending our man in Srinagar to hand this letter to you in person. It has just come to my attention that you have been living in Kashmir for quite some time; had I known of your presence out here, then I should have written to you before, as soon as it was apparent that your brother had disappeared somewhere along the high roads into China. Allow me to assure you, Miss Butler, that everything possible is being done to find your brother.

"I have regarded Gavin Butler as my friend as well as a close associate in all the affairs of our work out here. I place him high on my list as a brave and courageous man, worthy of the highest esteem.

"I recall your illustrious father, Sir William, and his services rendered to the Crown, above and beyond the call of duty, there in Kabul in January, 1842. None of us who are out here will forget that incident too soon. It did not escape my notice, and since Gavin was so closely connected, I can say he never once complained about his great loss there.

"It comes to me now that you must be feeling a double loss, and I want to reassure you again that we even now have a few bare traces of your brother which may indicate that he is not dead. Believe that."

I had glanced up from the letter after reading those first paragraphs, a sudden hope bursting within me, yet distrustful beyond reason. The words had reminded me of Gavin's laughing eyes and handsome bearded face all over again, and a strange new pain twisted around my heart. I met the eyes of "our man in Srinagar," in the form of Mr. Tobias Roberts.

He was probably near to Gavin's age and solid respectability lay upon him like a coating of dust, from the thick sandy hair and mustache, bushy above a firm determined mouth, to his fairly lean and impeccably clad form, in one of those khaki military suits so stiff without a crease which all Englishmen wear when they visit on official terms, and I realized at once that he did carry weight like that of a prince, faultlessly courteous, reliable, and with the capability to serve, no matter what crisis presented itself.

"At this moment, Miss Butler," the letter went on, "a matter which is very urgent in my own private affairs has come to the surface, and I wish to engage

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your time and person while you are still bewildered, perhaps, in the uncertainty of Gavin's whereabouts. It may be that you would welcome something to take your mind off anxiety for your brother, to divert your grief to something outside yourself."

With something like a bitter echo, I recalled how Gavin had once told me of Lord Gordon's persuasive charm to use his staff members to gain his own selfish desires.

"I have, unfortunately, a sister whose young age makes it imperative for me to look after her until she is safely married and in the keeping of a respectable and responsible husband. I regret to say she is a headstrong, self-willed young girl, quite immature for nineteen, and is very capable of ruining her life before it begins.

"She is, unfortunately again, the heiress to a vast fortune and estate, hers when she marries, or when she reaches twenty-five. I, being her only living relation and her brother, am the sole protector of her interests, and I find it more of a baffling problem to subdue her miscreant spirit as times wears on. Her wild escapades are indeed causing undue embarrassment to everyone responsible for her welfare.

"She has a temperament which makes it impossible for me to help her, I must admit, partly because of my work here in Nepal, which keeps me from taking her into my custody when she so needs it. My sister has given much grief to those in my employment to care for her, various governesses of the past and companions all her young life. I spared nothing as far as she is concerned, to her interests, so that you will know what you are up against. She has run away from the latest school in London which I had arranged for her to attend, somehow eluding the headmistress with the cunning mind of a little vixen. In short, Miss Butler, she is a little hellion that I would like to see tamed, and she needs a firm hand by someone with no nonsense.

"In my belief, you are that person, Miss Butler. Gavin mentioned you more than once in our many conversations. He always admired you for being level-headed, as he put it, with no nonsense whenever you had to cope with the most trying of situations with your past students, and always discreet in making decisions. I have a most excellent report of your sterling character. That, and the fact that we, our families, that is, have been neighbors for centuries in our homeland, doubles my belief that you are the right person to take my *sister in hand.*

"I have been informed that Bianca left her godmother's house in a most deceitful manner, boarded a ship which no one seemed to be able to trace, but apparently bound for Persia, intending to rendezvous somewhere on the top of the world with one notorious soldier of fortune, an Englishman making illicit and illegal runs by caravan between China and Afghanistan. I can learn nothing as yet of his origin, except that he is young, bold, and aggressive, and imagines himself to be an adventurer.

"I believe he comes from a poor but genteel family, but spends his time preying on young defenseless heiresses, my sister his latest victim. How she ever came in contact with this scoundrel, I cannot conceive, but heaven help him when I do set my hands on his throat!

"My scouts have informed me that David Markus is crafty and unreliable where his word is concerned. I fear greatly for my sister, who would throw herself on his mercy and receive none when she might need it.

"She is now en route to Srinagar, I have been informed by reliable sources. I want her to be intercepted there, for it could be the last stand in a civilized hill station before she encounters Markus. He dares not show his face there, I am certain. If he does, then he is a fool. But I believe he is too crafty to try anything so openhanded.

"Bianca, I must warn you, Miss Butler, is also capable of any trick in the book, and she will try to deceive you from the beginning. Mr. Tobias Roberts can give you in full detail what you may want to know, and just where my sister is most likely to take lodgings once she arrives there. No effort will be spared to help you intercept her, yet it all must be kept subtle, so that she won't renege and spoil your efforts to win her over to see sensibility as well as discretion.

"I implore you to consider my offer. Stop her at all cost from meeting up with David Markus. I have given Tobias authority to hand you a draft for an unlimited amount of money that you may need for expenses. Use it liberally. Tobias is to hand you a bonus in advance also, for your services to me."

I was stunned at the amount he mentioned; it quite took my breath, knocking the winds from my set sail to refuse him; my hands shook as I read on before dropping the letter into my lap.

"I shall be indebted to you, should you be able to bring about what others have not done, Miss Butler. Bring her to Nepal, for I believe the local color in the royal court is full enough of intrigue to capture her attention for the moment. The British residency is adequately comfortable, and she would be under my care, even pressured if necessary for the next five years. I should want you to remain with her as a constant companion, and I trust you to use your good judgment and common sense during that time.

"Tobias will arrange all travel and accommodation for you, and he will aid you in any situation that arises concerning my sister. I trust him implicitly, and so may you.

"May I say again that you may be reassured that everything possible is being done to locate your brother. I wish you the best in this venture ahead of you. Remember, she has a wily nature, so be forewarned. In all regards, I am sincerely in your debt."

It was signed: Lord Gordon Harding.

Mr. Tobias Roberts, had been studying me and my appearance from the moment he'd sat down, and I had the cool little thought that he had already summed up the situation.

He spoke first. "Miss Butler. You have no idea just how important this request from Lord Gordon is. I hope you will not hesitate to accept his generous offer, and I can certainly reassure you that you won't regret it. I have the draft already drawn up in your name." He brought out a packet from his briefcase, and handed it over to me.

"You know then, the contents of this letter?" Of course he did, I thought, somehow annoyed by everything: the way his polite steady blue eyes searched my face annoyed me, as did the warm sandy hair springing up from his high forehead, and the waiting patience he bore like a shield.

"Yes. The contents have been disclosed to me. I might say, in regard to Lord Gordon's offer, that it is most generous of him, for not in all of my knowledge of his engaging any other young woman for his sister's care has he been more generous than now. But then, you have been well recommended, Miss Butler. I have no doubt that was the reason Lord Gordon could entrust his sister to your care.

"Lord Gordon's sister is somewhat of impetuous young woman, a child still, who needs a firm but gentle touch to help her in this most difficult period, in my own opinion. She lost both of her parents at an early age, and such instructions as only a mother could give to a talented young girl were denied her completely, it seems."

"You know Miss . . . Harding then?"

"Her ladyship is known to me, I daresay."

"So she carries a title, then. Lady—?" I stopped.

"Lady Bianca Harding," he finished for me.

"Of course," I said, recalling her name mentioned in the letter. "I see. And why doesn't Lord Gordon have his men intercept her, and carry her forcibly to Nepal, as I seem to get the impression he would like to keep her under lock and key until she comes of age? If he knows where she is in Asia, I hardly see what point engaging me would have, when he can simply take her by force."

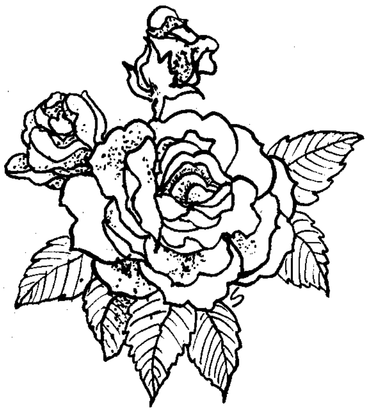
"That would not do at all, Miss Butler. Lord Gordon knows that with the slightest opposition his sister would resist and cause a scandal which could have major results in certain diplomatic relations. You do understand do you not, Miss Butler, that from the viewpoint of protocol, every step must be carefully weighed and not one shred of scandal touch Lord Gordon's name while he is in Nepal at this time? He is counting on protocol. She must come, with your persuasion, of course, of her own accord. To act rashly would serve no purpose."

"Of course I understand," I said. "Perfectly so. Surely, though, I cannot be expected to do what others have failed so far to do. If she is so cunning, as her brother writes of her, as to have outwitted all the others he has placed in charge of her," I said, noting the audacity of it all, "she can also outwit me. I fail to see just where I can change a rebellious teenager, which she has obviously proven herself to be, into a mature adult, or into a meek young girl, which Lord Gordon seems to want done during this *charade*."

How steady and direct his eyes were, with all the confidence he had in his employer! "Lord Gordon is fully aware of the possible setbacks, to be sure, Miss Butler. I believe he merely wants to happen what is in her best of interests. We can only assume that if you accept his offer, she just may respond. You see, I am of the firm opinion that Lady Bianca wants to go to stay with her brother. I believe she has wanted to have his full and undivided attention. I think she has tried, unsuccessfully, to get his attention, and has resorted to a sort of blackmail to get it. Now, this is all my own private opinion, as a bystander, looking on."

"I see," I said slowly, thinking that this was highly unusual, but rather interesting. "Have you spoken of this to Lord Gordon?"

"It is not something we have discussed, no. I will admit, however, that he is sincere in his duty toward her, and that he has complete faith in your ability to persuade her to change her mind about meeting this David Markus." He smiled; it was a sunny smile, very warm and unaffected. It struck me then that Mr. Tobias Roberts was as solid and steady as a rock, never swerving in his loyalty, and just as pleasant.



I glanced down at the unopened packet in my lap. Impulsively I opened it, thinking that not for all the tea in China did I want to be saddled with a runaway spoiled heiress. Thus, as I pulled the money from the packet, I had a sense of overwhelming defeat. The sum of it stunned me, for it was a stupendous amount. I glanced up, bewildered. "There must be some mistake—"

He shook his head. "There is no mistake, I can assure you, Miss Butler. Lord Gordon is rather keen on your accepting his offer. Nothing less would have been adequate, to his way of thinking." His voice was a little gruff, but not unkind.

"So it appears," I said. I sat in an uncomfortable moment of silence, my eyes catching the flight of the bulbul from the edge of the almond tree to perch on the porch banister, golden with his plumage shimmering in the light. Then I looked at Mr. Roberts. "It could prove too great a task for one woman to achieve. And should I accept the offer," I said slowly with meaning, "and fail to guide Lady Bianca into the maturity her brother so desires for her, what then, Mr. Roberts?" I glanced down at the money in my hands, then back at him. "A girl already nineteen, with a self-will to deceive the very best of adults, can hardly turn meek and allow a perfect stranger to take the reins of her future in hand."

"That is taken into consideration. We cannot help what fails beyond our power. But the money is yours, whatever the outcome. You can be well assured that Lord Gordon fully understands just what risks there are involved, and where he is placing you, when it comes to his sister. You have but to accept the offer, and this other draft"—he brought out another packet from the briefcase and handed it to me—"is yours also. Expenses can be tiresome, but I'm sure you will find all this ample to cover them." He smiled indulgently, the light in his eyes warm behind the blue. He knew then, as well as I did, that I had mentally accepted this highly unusual offer.

"Am I right in saying that I should write an agreement to Lord Gordon to accept his offer, then?" I folded the letter and with the money, replaced it in the packet.

He inclined his head to one side, and leaned back in the cane chair. "I will write him, Miss Butler, to say you've done so. I think it doesn't need to be said that if you accept the draft and the money as a bonus for your efforts, that you have accepted the post. It is sealed, then, and with your signature on this document, we shall conclude the matter, and I will send it to Lord Gordon." He handed me a written document, which after scanning briefly, I signed my name with the quill pen he had ready for me.

While he dusted the ink with drying powder, and began to replace it in his case, I poured more lemonade into his glass. He accepted it graciously. And then, I asked: "Have you any knowledge of just where Lady Bianca may be at this moment?"

"Yes. I do in fact know that she is lodged here in Srinagar, on the far side of Dal Lake, in a most disreputable way-side inn for caravans passing through Kashmir." He frowned thoughtfully.

I could not hide my astonishment. "So she is here, then," I breathed.

"She arrived yesterday, in an elephant caravan from Rawalpindi."

"But this is most astounding, Mr. Roberts!" I declared. "If you know where she is, then you must know what her intentions are. . . ." I stopped, uneasily puzzled that he should be so calm about it. "Does she know about you? And—forgive me if I seem bewildered—but can she know of her brother's intentions?"

"Yes, indeed. I went to her the first thing this morning before coming out here to you. She is well informed of what Lord Gordon has in mind."

I was more amazed than before. "Did she—object?"

He shook his head, taking a long swallow of the fruit drink, then set the glass down on the tray on the table between us. "Not Lady Bianca. It was she who contacted me at the residency, informing me of her arrival last evening, sending a note over early this morning. She didn't object in the least when I gave her brother's letter to her, but rather, she seemed to accept it all in a resignedly good grace. Which led me to conclude that she just may want her brother's care. It's most reassuring, don't you think?"

I didn't answer that, for I couldn't; it seemed to all go against what Lord Gordon had written of his sister. But I asked, "Then I take it she has not yet kept her rendezvous with the young man in question?"

"No. He seems to have stood her up, and she is a little dazed by it all, I believe. I should think it our gain if we take our action now, Miss Butler, and move in on her at once. I want to introduce you to her, and as soon as possible, while she is apparently having second thoughts about that wild escapade she could have with David Markus."

"Hmn-mn. I see what you mean. Yes. Should we go at once, then?"

"It would be advisable. Are you prepared to accompany me now?"

"I should think it my duty, Mr. Roberts," I said.

"Very well, then. But I implore you to try to persuade her to leave the inn, and today, if it can be done. It is a most unsavory place, and I distrust that landlord! If I may suggest it, perhaps it would be to your advantage to invite Lady Bianca to stay here with you, until such time as we can arrange travel to Nepal, more favorable when the monsoon is over in September." He didn't blink an eyelash. I saw his meaning.

"So that she won't have a chance to meet this David Markus, should he just happen to materialize and persuade her to go with him?"

"Quite right, Miss Butler. We understand each other." He smiled back at me.

"Yes. Then I do agree it should be well for her to come here with me. It will be to her advantage as well as mine." I stood up. "Then, if you will permit me a quarter of an hour, I shall accompany you. I will want to inform my houseboys, so that they too, will expect us."

I left him then, and walked into the house; the parlor and dining room were already in the quiet yellow shade of the canvas awnings stretched out like giant butterfly wings from the windows. The yellow lent a soft light to the beautifully polished wood paneling, and I moved up the carved wooden staircase to my rooms on the upper floor, knowing my mind had suddenly begun to stretch and deepen with this new challenge.

Strange Love

by Fay Whitman

I love him
in the strangest ways,
even on
'I hate him days.'
If I can't hate him
quite sincerely
Then I must love him
very dearly.

The limp cotton morning gown I wore clung to my damp skin, and I stripped it off and carefully sponged my hot skin with cool violet water, then removed the pins which held my hair in its heavy knot, and began to brush the long honey-colored strands. This cooled my head considerably. I then rearranged my hair into a smooth curve around my face and fastened the knot on the nape of my neck with the ivory pins.

I didn't hesitate as to what I should wear, but pulled out my coolest and lightest gown: the pale-amber muslin with the wide skirt and lace inserts, with lace around the low décolleté neckline and at the elbows. It fell over my petticoats and the crinoline like watered silk, and when I glanced in the mirror I was amazed to see that my eyes had a strange new light behind them, and my color was high. Oh, yes, I felt I was somehow a different creature already.

With a careful glance in that same mirror, I composed myself and slowly pulled on the lace mitts; I placed the money and the letter in the reticule which was attached to my skirts, and then picked up the lace-trimmed parasol. I was ready; hardly had that quarter of an hour passed when I descended the stairs and returned to the porch where Mr. Roberts was talking with old Mohammud Gulag, the man who owned my house.

They turned as I joined them, and I said, "Mohammud, I am going out with Mr. Roberts now. But I shall return, possibly with a young lady to stay as my guest for some time."

"I will see to it. And dinner?" He glanced knowingly at Mr. Roberts.

Mr. Roberts took his cue before I could say anything. "I shan't be joining the ladies for dinner, Mohammud."

"If I can persuade Lady Bianca to come back with me this day, then it shall be dinner for two, Mohammud," I said.

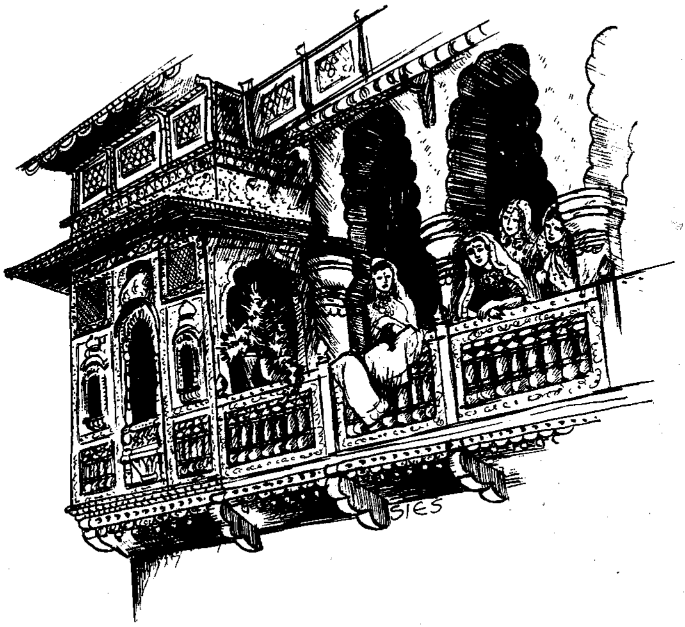
"Very well," he said. He touched his forehead in that gesture that said he understood, and watched Mr. Roberts and me walk down the garden path to the gate where the carriage and driver waited.

Dal Lake was a pearl of water and flowers set between the mountains, and was fringed by lacy weeping willow trees. The mountains stood out clearly, blue and dry with purple shadows, and down on the lake they reflected on the water, breaking the intense blue of reflected sky as well.

When I had arrived in late winter, the pink from the almond groves, the yellow of the first crocus and mustard, the pale crystal blue of the sky, the white cherry blossoms and clouds, and the green from new willows down along the waterways and canals created visions of poetry and romance. From the lowest terrace, where cherry and almond trees were white and pink against the green of the mountains, the view was breathtaking. Downward, almond and cherry blossoms were pink and white against the blue water of the lakes.

For the Vale of Kashmir was a chain of lakes and rivers, set with orchards and gardens in a ring of snow mountains. The water came down off the glaciers on those far Himalayan peaks, cascading down through the passes until it fell to the Vale floor and flowed into its lakes and rivers.

We skirted the lake, heading for Dal Gate, where the River Jhelum flowed



into the lake. During our ride into Srinagar, we were mostly quiet, each in our own thoughts. It occurred to me more than once that Mr. Roberts must have known my brother, yet I was reluctant to speak of Gavin, and he didn't volunteer. But he did tell me that he came to Srinagar as often as he could.

"Mostly, my job takes me to Calcutta or Delhi. It is a relief to get away from those places and come to a paradise like Kashmir. Have you been down on the lake, in the backwater, Miss Butler? Those houseboats being built there as summer residences are very unique, and I say, I fancy one of them myself."

I assured him I had taken a shikara through the canals to Nagin Lake; mostly, this was mere polite chatter, and we crossed the bridge to follow the Jhelum River, which wound like a serpent through the old city.

Life throbbed with all its joys and sorrows on this river; flat vegetable boats came in from the strange floating gardens out of the backwater of Nagin Lake, laden with huge melons, tomatoes, cucumbers and fresh greens to be sold every morning to merchants and to anyone shopping for the ripe summer fruits. The flower boats came too, laden to the gunwales with every variety of fresh flower, making violet and pink and scarlet and green reflections in long colorful panels on the water. Shikaras, the canopied boats which passengers relaxed in, glided gracefully down the river bearing prosperous merchants to their homes or businesses on the lake. Houseboats lined the river where whole families lived together.

It took a while to get through the city, for it was just after midday. The streets were crowded, and the driver had to use his skill to push the horse between the shops in the narrow crooked lanes, but at last we approached the thick stone Moghul Bridge that arched over the Mar Canal.

The inn was located at this junction, in the curve, sprawling with its back right on the canal. It was an ancient structure of faded-red brick and wooden balconied rooms that perilously overhung the back waterfront, where most of the business transpired. Its front spilled out into a huge walled-in courtyard; around us swirled the enigmatic caravans from the whole heartland of Asia. I felt a thrill of excitement stir up all that sense of wild adventure and romance, seeing the caravans coming and going.

Men that had crossed and recrossed the high routes over the Oxus and the Indus rivers, coming from more than a thousand miles away, found their way here. Tall men from tribes in old kingdoms I did not know existed, with their tanned beautiful faces and smiles, dressed in fur boots and leather tunics, driving camels from Mongolia, and yaks, horses and pack mules, were here. There were elephants and the white-turbaned Sikhs who drove them over the Banhihal Pass to Jammu and Rawalpindi; caravans going and coming from India and Afghanistan to Siangking, Kashgar, Turkistan and Yarkand, to Leh through the Zojila Pass; north, south, east, west, all caravans swung crazily into this courtyard.

It occurred to me that Lady Bianca had chosen this place to lodge in because of a free and uninhibited spirit; it was the one thing that often cried out inside my own turbulent but curbed spirit. I wanted to be set free and to follow with abandon all the desires and dreams in search of myself! Did this young untamed heiress, whose impulsive nature I was sent to curb, feel this strange exciting movement? I could almost envy her, and in some ways I did, even without having met her.

These were my thoughts as Mr. Roberts helped me down from the carriage to stand beside him at the yawning entrance of the inn.

"She couldn't have chosen a more ideal inn to lodge herself in if she intended to keep her rendezvous with Mr. Markus," I said, more to myself than to him. And I silently wondered if this David Markus had, indeed, arranged it for her in advance.

Tobias Roberts seemed suddenly affronted; his voice was gruff when he said, "She should have gone to the residency. Nedou's is the logical place for a young unprotected lady. I'm surprised that she even considered staying here. Markus is a scoundrel if he arranged this, and he could have very little respect for her person to even suggest it! I don't like the looks of this. Cutthroats, every last one of them. Oh, I say, Miss Butler. You must do your best in persuading her to leave this place."

He looked at me; the sunlit dust swirled like a bright fog around us, and his eyes narrowed with that light in them. I saw that he was annoyed, and by everything. The unpleasant odorous sweaty bodies, the strong smells of leather, hay, and dung clung close to the very air in the heat of noon. It irritated him like sand rubbed on raw skin, I thought, and I don't know why I felt as detached from it as I did in that moment. Nothing was offensive to me, as it seemed to be for him.

Before I could reassure him that I would do my best to lure Lady Bianca away as he wished me to do, a voice called out behind us, and we turned, startled. It was the girl herself, dressed in a long white burnoose cut so simply that it made her look regal in spite of her diminutive form.

"Dearest Toby! What suspense you have kept me in! I thought you'd never arrive, and I'm famished. I've just this hour ordered our lunch, and thank heavens you've come. It's most crowded in here, but we do have a small room I've engaged for our meal, and we can talk in relative quiet there."

I had one profound and lasting impression of this young woman whom I'd been hired to guide into maturity: she could never be the little hellion her brother had so erroneously branded her. The hood which covered her hair fell back a little as she looked up at Tobias Roberts, who towered like a giant over her, and revealed bright penny-copper curls, framing a heart-shaped face that was young and poignantly expectant, and there was not a trace of that guile which Lord Gordon had almost convinced me I should discern.

Tobias Roberts seemed a gruff fatherly figure scowling down at her. "Lady Bianca," he said, but not unkindly, "I had thought to take you from this place and have our dinner at Nedou's Hotel. We'd be far more comfortable there."

She blinked her wide eyes, and I noticed how very candid they were. "That is so like you to be so thoughtful, dear Toby. But I should not want to offend the proprietor here—not now, after putting him to so much trouble seeing to the room we're to have. He was ever so kind, and with all the demands made upon him with all these people coming and going, he even had the room scrubbed and cleaned so that we should be comfortable during our meal. You must agree to this, and we shall then retire this very minute to the room, after you have introduced me to Miss Butler."

She became almost shy then, as her eyes left Tobias and touched mine. There was nothing else he could do, after so pretty a speech, and he became all protocol as he introduced us. "I say, but I do hope you'll be friends."

"And why ever should we not be friends, Miss Butler?" She held out her hand and as I took it in a firm handshake, I noticed the light warm tan of her skin as the sleeve fell back.

"I see no reason at all, Lady Bianca," I said, smiling down into those great pansy-like eyes. I saw too, a fine sprinkling of light freckles across the pert nose. I was anxious that this first meeting should be on a sound basis of trust, and I was certain that she must have been thinking along the same lines as we stood there in that brief moment. She looked like a little girl, for she was much shorter than my own tall person.

"There." She smiled, a tiny dimple playing at the far corner of her full pink mouth, almost innocently provocative. "So it is settled. We shall get along famously. Now," she turned, "our host, Samsar Chand Koul, is waiting for us. See how he smiles? He is ever so anxious to please." We followed her into the thriving den of the not too clean inn.

Tobias said darkly, "My word, Lady Bianca. I dare say that with you as his paying guest, he can hardly have a better reason to please." He glared ominously at the man who came toward us.

"Welcome to Hari Parbath Inn," he said, nearly bowing himself to the floor. His long thin face was bean-brown and he had a voice of honey and oil, and I distrusted him as I knew Tobias Roberts did. He wore a dirty gray pheran, the loose robe which all Kashmiri men wore, and because he was a Moslem, he wore a white turban of folded muslin.

Mr. Roberts took complete charge of the situation, expecting immediate attention, which won him instant respect. The man nearly snapped to his command. "Take the ladies to the room, and make sure no one follows them. I shall inform my driver that we shall be staying." He turned to us. "I shan't be but a moment. Then I will join you." To the bowing proprietor, he said sternly, "Carry on."

"Very good," Samsar Chand Koul said, touching his forehead quickly to Tobias. He turned then and led the way across the noisy crowded room of foreign nationals who mingled here. We knew that the strange dark eyes of the caravan drivers were upon us, two Englishwomen.

The room was a curious low-ceilinged affair, smoky and dark with centuries of use, the heavy beams blackened with age. The smell of leather and unwashed bodies was strong, along with the scents from food cooking in the open kitchens that faced the water canal front. Voices in the quick alien tongues were raucous and ebullient, with the hauntingly sad strains that came from the old street musician rising above it all in snatches from the open windows.

When the man in front of us opened the door, we were ushered into a room that surprised me with its airiness in spite of the smallness. It opened onto a balcony; I caught glimpses of green sunny willows and the canal and scarlet flowers and kingfishers dartling like blue and orange blazes across my vision.

◆

I love thee, I love but thee,
With a love that shall not die
Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars are old,
And the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold!

Bayard Taylor
Bedouin Song

An attractive table of polished walnut was in the center of the room, with a low round bowl of pink and yellow roses arranged so that their petals reflected in the shining surface. The chairs looked comfortable, and there was a comfortable sofa in deep-red mohair near the open balcony door. We should all be quite easy together in here, I thought, noting also the three places set at the table.

Lady Bianca turned to me. "Miss Butler . . . Tawny. What a strange unusual name! But, it matches you, you know. You have that color." She studied me for a brief second. "They're nearly yellow; no, not yellow, I think. A cloudy amber. For eyes, that's most disturbing and unusual."

She made me uncomfortable with her keen observance. "Most people would say they are cat's eyes," I said, laughing, trying to hide my uneasiness. "You are very romantic and poetic, Lady Bianca."

"You must drop that *Lady*—just call me Bianca—and please allow me to call you Tawny."

It made me smile; there was no pretty pretense about her forthright yet refreshing personality. She moved to the sofa, and I sat down beside her. She suddenly sank back, the burnoose billowing out around her, and she rested her head on the back of the sofa.

"To be honest, I am utterly exhausted, Tawny," and she seemed breathless. "My journey from Kabul to Rawalpindi was hazardous, to say the least. I should not want to attempt it again, and from Rawalpindi over the Himalayas to here has just about done me in. I seem to be quite faint. Not like me at all." She closed her eyes, and I was alarmed.

But before I could say anything, she opened her eyes and said quickly: "You must not breathe a word of this to Toby! He is an old uncle, gruff but harmless, I know. Yet he will carry me off and plunk me down into that tight little British society at Nedou's Hotel and let all the old frumps fall over their skirts to make Lady Bianca Harding as miserable as they are themselves! And I should hate that." She laughed, and I noticed for the first time how flushed she seemed. She brought out a small ivory fan and began fanning her face.

"Perhaps you are momentarily suffering from the altitude, Bianca. Remember, we *are* living in a mountain-top atmosphere even in the Vale of Kashmir; it takes a bit of getting used to. I should think a few days of complete rest would do wonders, and I

want to invite you to stay at my house, beginning today. No Nedou's Hotel for you."

She looked at me over the edge of her fan, her eyes dilated almost to a dark stormy blue, and her face blanched, the flush I'd seen earlier paling. It alarmed me.

But she lifted her head and said with a smile, "There. Now that does show you just how little I know of you! I had no idea that you have a house here in this incredible hill station, nor indeed, do I know why you are living in Kashmir! Oh, undoubtedly I shall discover that answer, and we've loads to learn of each other, haven't we? You are most generous and gracious to offer me lodging . . . but how I chatter! You will tire of me easily, I am sure. Oh. Here is dear Toby. Please say nothing, I beg you."

Mr. Roberts came into the room with Samsar Koul following him, and two young houseboys bearing huge platters of steaming food, which they placed on the table, and they ran to fetch more throughout the entire meal.

It was a Persian feast, and one of the best I'd ever eaten outside of Mohammud Gulag's cuisine at my table. It was pilaf; shredded mutton stuffed with spices, onions, raisins, pine nuts and oranges; roast kid and fish stuffed with rice and peppers; apricots stuffed with almonds and walnuts soaked in honey.

The chapati, a crunchy flat bread made of coarse wheat flour and baked in clay ovens over charcoal, was used as scoops to eat the pilaf. We used our fingers, simply breaking the chapati into chunks and wrapping it about the rice and mutton and vegetables and eating it.

It surprised each one of us to see that we all had acquired the art of eating in this fashion, a rule unspoken that it was best to join in the customs rather than fight them, and we laughed as we dipped our fingers into the water bowls placed for our use by Samsar Chand Koul, and used the white linen cloths that were none too clean for drying.

Through it all, Bianca was content to make things easy for Tobias by chattering lightly, and we compared our experiences in adjusting to a different culture.

When the plates were removed and the hot, sweet-spiced Kashmiri tea was brought in, we began to discuss just what and where we'd go from here. Bianca seemed to want to discuss openly what her brother had in mind for her, and she did not hesitate to assure us both that she knew he did not want her to get in touch with David Markus. I met Tobias's eye and knew that he'd been partially correct about her. She wanted her brother to care about her. I was moved.

"It's very simple," she began to explain herself. "David didn't show up, that's all. I thought—well, I believed he would be here, you see. There was no message, and after all I've been through—" She stopped, biting her underlip, and it was an uncomfortable moment for all of us. Tobias said nothing, but I could see he was in deep thought.

I was silent, digesting what she was getting across to us. She had arrived in the Persian Gulf, hoping he would meet her, but this David Marcus had stood her up there, and she had traveled to Kabul with other English travelers who had been on her ship. Now she was ready to accept what seemed her destiny.

"So. The sensible thing to do now, since I am here, is to abide by Gordy's wishes. I must confess"—she smiled, her lips pouting prettily—"I have wanted an excuse to go to Nepal. Gordy would never ever have invited me there had I not forced my presence here in India. Admit it, Toby. You know Gordy better than I do. He has never had the slightest intentions of having me live with him anywhere."

Toby's eyes were cool and blue as he studied Bianca, and his answer was dignified. "We must be fair, Lady Bianca. Your brother has always had your interests at heart. He also has the tremendous responsibility of his position to consider, and it demands his undivided attention. But you have been his one great concern through it all. I believe he will be happy to have you with him in Kathmandu."

We fell into a silence for a short while; the sun made patterns on the balcony with the willow green, and splashes of scarlet and orange marigold lay hot in pools of brightness on the old wooden floor. Inside, the blue and rose of the carpet which covered the room's floor were soft colors, and it was cool and shadowy in spite of the tremendous heat of the sun outside. The muted sounds of the house beyond seemed far away, and stuffed as we were with the dinner we'd had, it all seemed to lie heavy and made a somnolent hour.

"Tawny has invited me to stay at her house, Toby," she said in a languid voice, not at all hurried. I was pleased that it was she who had mentioned the subject. "And I have decided to accept it and with pleasure." She turned to me. "Tawny, dear, I shall move in tomorrow with your approval. That will give me time today to simply relax, I think. Is that too soon?"

"I was expecting that you might come home with me today, Bianca. I mean that. Won't you change your mind and come this afternoon? I can wait, for I have nothing too demanding."

Toby picked up my defense. "Of course you must go with Miss Butler, Lady Bianca. This place is not fit for you to remain in. It is not safe, either. There are known cases of women being kidnapped in broad daylight by some of these caravan drivers. They know what price a white woman can bring on the slave trade markets! You are probably the most watched young woman ever to have crossed the premises. You must change your mind, and let me take you back to Miss Butler's house."

She looked aghast, then burst out laughing. "Oh, Toby! For a moment I thought you were serious. I am perfectly safe here. I have Samsar Chand Koul eating out of my hand, as well as the houseboys. No one could be more safe than that!"

"My dear Lady Bianca! You are an heiress, and therefore worth a ransom! I feel it my duty to remind you that should word ever get about that you are an heiress, your life would be very much in danger. And heaven help the scoundrels if Lord Gordon should catch up with them!"

Her soft laughter mocked his seriousness. "That would be most exciting, I must admit. Kidnapped and held for ransom by one of those tall dark-eyed Kirghiz chiefs, hidden in a caravan, and Gordy so angry that he'd come out of his shell to rescue me! How romantic! It does appeal to my imagination." She was dreamy-eyed for a moment. "It does have all the romance of a novel," she went on, seeing the expression on Toby's face, and when I said nothing, she added, "but I fear my brother's wrath more than my love for *that kind of adventure." I thought then* that she might have changed her mind about coming with me today.

"I won't be persuaded to move from my lodgings this day, dearest Toby. Tawny, you must help me convince him that I am perfectly safe for now. If I haven't been kidnapped by those brigands of Persia and Afghanistan whose caravans I passed daily for the past six months, then one more night will scarcely find me in the snatches of a bloodthirsty Mongolian driver!" She stood up. "No. I shall remain here, because I want to rest. I will arrive on your doorstep with bag and baggage tomorrow, Tawny." This was not an unprotected little girl speaking, but a young woman with a mind of her own, and I heard the hard flintlike determination in every word. It was her way, too, of dismissing us, and there was nothing else we could do but to accept it.

"Very well, then, Lady Bianca." Toby's voice was even and revealed only his polite concern. He would not argue. "We shall leave you here, trusting that you will keep your doors locked, and a servant to sleep across the threshold of your room. Don't forget that most important measure of safety. Give me your word on that score. I shall rest easier on leaving you in this place."

I was suddenly amused by it all. She was right, of course. She had proved that she could think for herself, and there was no need to be alarmed. She was perfectly safe, even as safe as I was in my house above the lake. Hadn't she even proved it by being here last evening? And she was right about the proprietor, Samsar Chand Koul. He was eating out of her pretty little hand. I knew a word with him from Tobias Roberts would put him straight. He would turn the house upside down to protect her.

"Of course I will give you my word, Toby dear. You have it. My servant always sleeps across the doorway with a knife in his hand. Be easy in your minds, both of you." She smiled, rather wanly, and touched my arm gently. "I am looking forward to tomorrow at your house, Tawny. We have much to talk over."

"Then it will be my pleasure to have you there. Take care, Bianca. I shall expect you." I gave her instructions on how to find the house.

We left her then, Toby and I, with our last glimpse of her going up a flight of dark wooden stairs to where her rooms were.

The lake was a quiet Japanese gray; hardly a sound came up from it, not even the jump of a fish or the splash of a paddle from one of the flatboats which drifted across its placid surface. The mountains were deep purple, and the peaks were lifted up into a faint swirl of shell-pink mists.

I rose early, restless, went out into the garden, and stared at the lake so serene. A new prospect had opened for me, providentially, and I was going to make the best of those changes by forgetting my old griefs. My dear father had died tragically and then Gavin had given me his special attention; now he too was gone, but I had survived, and had to go on living. This new challenge was a bid for that life, and I accepted it, hoping I could help Bianca at this time in her life. I began cutting the fresh flowers I wanted to place in her room, and began to look forward to this day ahead of me, and to Lady Bianca's coming. I was happy.

It was late afternoon and she had not arrived. I was not unduly alarmed, but I kept an anxious vigil nonetheless as the hours drifted by. The house looked most charming, scented with the late roses and with the hot orange and yellow marigolds I'd arranged in great clumps of color throughout the rooms. I was certain she would appreciate it.

At last, I heard the sound of the carriage; it came at a tremendous sound of speed, and I hurried down the stairs and out on the porch just as it lurched to a stop down by the gate.

The latch clicked loudly, like an echo in the hush of the afternoon, and I kept an anxious eye on the garden path that wound under an almond tree. To my dismay, Bianca did not appear, but Mr. Roberts did. I waited, but she was not behind him. As he hurried up the path, I became aware that he was dressed in Khaki carefully tucked inside highly polished brown boots for bush riding. He removed his helmet carefully and placed it under one arm as he came up the steps.

Not by any outward emotion did he display what he was feeling, yet I saw the blazing blue of his eyes, and an uneasiness flowed over my heart.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Roberts?" I couldn't keep the apprehension from my words. "Lady Bianca has not yet arrived. I've been expecting her—"

He lifted his hand in a gesture that he already knew this. "Miss Tawny. The worst has indeed happened. I drew it out of that oily Samsar Chand Koul, by heaven if I didn't! Lady Bianca has disappeared from the inn. It looks like an abduction, from all I can learn. She was taken forcibly, and probably in a small party that is making for Kashgar. Now"—his eyes never left my own—"there isn't time to go into details, but what I want to know is this.

"Will you come with me? I'm going after her. She may need you when we catch up with her abductor. We cannot waste time. I'm heading out this very hour."

We stood on the steps facing each other, and my heart leaped to this invitation, almost staggered with mixed emotions I hadn't even dared dream of.

"Of course I will go with you. I shall consider it my duty. Just give me one moment to prepare—" I stopped, seeing his lifted hand again.

"I've taken care of our preparations. Our mounts and packhorses are waiting at the crossroads in Gandarbal. We shall make for there immediately. And I shall speak to Mohammud while you prepare yourself. I think your houseboy, Jaseen, should come with us. He can do for you on the trail."

"Very well. I shan't be long."

I hurried to my rooms, changed into my riding clothes, and put together things I felt I should need for some time, and I joined Tobias and Jaseen. Thus, within two hours at sunset, our little caravan of five left Gandarbal heading toward Gilgit, the northernmost outpost of Kashmir, riding hard.

It was one month later, at the end of September, when we came into Gilgit and took rooms in an old inn near the marketplace. The snows had not yet come, but it was cold. The leaves were brassy bright red on the old chenar trees, and the pine was a thick dense green on the mountain slopes.

We had arrived near midmorning,

and I was grateful to be lodged in a room, albeit one bare of furnishings except for a low cot with webbed ropings, a table and one chair. To me it was luxury after living in a tent for four weeks. Toby had left me in my room and had gone alone to the marketplace, where the caravans converged, to learn what he could. He returned after a brief hour and informed me of the news. I gave him a bowl of salted yak-butter tea as he sat down on the chair, and I returned to the cot, where I sat cross-legged on a quilt.

He'd learned that a small caravan led by an English trader known as Markus had come through Gilgit three days ago, on its way to Baltit, the capital of Hunza. A white woman was with him.

I was stunned. I could say nothing even had I wanted to, so I simply stared at Toby, sipping that thick brew. It wasn't hard to figure out that she had deceived us both; that she had arranged the whole abduction plot to look as if she had been forcibly taken, while in fact she had slipped away in disguise and had met up with David Markus as prearranged.

I should have been angry; she'd been deliberately deceptive, with the cunning of a little vixen, and I was reminded all over again that her brother had cautioned me in his letter that she would do this. I could have laughed and passed it off as a great joke, but because Toby was so serious, and watching me, I spoke out my thoughts.

"So it has all been for nothing." My voice was reflective, yielding to defeat too easily. "She set out to deceive us both from the beginning." I wasn't indignant, for I'd been forewarned, but my concern for her welfare had been genuine. "She is already with David Markus, and nothing we can do can alter that."

Toby was quiet, in deep thought, and I knew by his silence that he had more to say, so I waited. We had lived closely during the weeks past, and he had been unrelenting in our pursuit, wild as it had now turned out to be. We'd ridden hard and had camped in primitive overnight places, setting out each day with the sunrise in our faces, with the hope that we'd somehow catch up with the elusive abductor before he could cross the Hunza border into China before the snows came.

I felt I knew Toby as he knew me by now; it had been a curious relationship all the way, and I hadn't minded the harsh demands of such rough travel, not at all. More than once, I was aware Toby had given me looks of appraisal for my perseverance in the thick of it.

It was some long moments before Toby spoke what was on his mind. "There is news just filtering in from Baltit with the first caravan traders. I can't ignore that news, Tawny. When Markus arrived in Baltit, a Kirghiz chieftain of a Turkistani tribe, known as Khan Shayet, came tearing down into Baltit from the north and confronted Markus. He called Markus out, which meant he wanted a fight. But, apparently, Markus refused and later was reported to have slipped out of Baltit. Rumors have come that he fled, leaving his caravan and the white woman, and that the Kirghiz took her as his captive. I don't like it." He shook his head slowly, staring down into his empty bowl, then lifted his eyes to meet mine.

"Do you suppose Markus deserted her?"

"I don't know what to think on that score, Tawny. But I don't like the sound of it. That we have virtually no proof, only hearsay, that Lady Bianca is a victim of her own making now, however deserving or not, I cannot allow it to pass without looking into it all fully."

The beard on his face, which he'd let grow during these past weeks, was a deep russet shade next to his sandy hair, and it accentuated the fierce blue of his eyes; they narrowed as a small silence held us, and I waited almost breathless for his next words.

"I am going after her, Tawny. There is little else I can do. It may take weeks, months, and the snows will come. But I am going after her. I cannot ask you to continue on with me, for it is too hazardous, as well as dangerous. I will arrange for you to join a caravan to return to Srinagar—"

"I wouldn't dream of putting you to that task, Toby!" I cried, and I stood up to face him. "Besides, I feel I must earn that money which Lord Gordon entrusted to me." I laughed. "Where you go, I can go. Bianca will need me. I do insist," I added quietly.

"It may be dangerous . . ." he began, then hesitated.

"Bianca is in danger, and far more than I may ever know. She will need me, I'm certain." I was persistent, and as we looked at each other I could see that he was actually relieved as well as pleased.

"Very well, then. That's settled. We may as well move on, and not waste precious time. I believe every hour will count now. We have the weather to fight from here onward."

Preparations had to be made quickly. Fresh mounts were bargained for, and new supplies were stashed in the packs. Toby wrote a letter to Lord Gordon, and I wrote a small note to Jaseen's grandfather, Mohammud Gulag, informing him of our prolonged journey.

Thus, barely a few hours in Gilgit, our small caravan set out once more on the first stage of our ride into the kingdom of Hunza. Toby had hired a Hunzukut guide to take us along one of the most treacherous trails we had yet to pass over. We rode hard and fast along the Gilgit River for several hours. Then, just as the sun was making a red disk of flame between the snow peaks, which always surround us in this high country, we rounded a bend sharply to the left and entered into the Hunza Valley. The road began to climb. As it climbed, the trail grew narrower, and rougher than any trail I'd previously known. It was no more than a beaten dusty track of rock worn by hundreds of years over which camel cravans had traveled over from Kashgar to Kashmir. Every few feet, our horses kicked up rocks and pebbles that were flung out into space, landing in the canyons far below. The trail was but a ledge, not wide enough for more than one horse, single file. Our guide pushed ahead with absolute devil-may-care assurance; he knew every inch of the trail, knew its hazards, but he rode in his saddle with a straight proud back, fearless, and we could do little but follow.

It was already dark when we descended into the floor of the valley and found a huddle of stone buildings that resembled a wayfaring inn for pilgrims, and we were made welcome for the night. The first of the icy winds of late September blew down through the canyon, heralding a winter that was to come all too soon; thus I was glad for the protection of the thick stone walls that night.

The earthen floor was beaten down smoothly around the warmth of the fire pit in the center; it was pleasant and quite comfortable as well as amusing, as we sat around that fire and shared dried apricots and walnuts after our supper of roasted kid, with the members of a passing caravan going south and the owners of the inn.

One of the caravan drivers had crudely asked Toby if he had some opium he wanted taken into Kashgar, and through the deep thick haze of smoke in the room I saw Toby's eyes narrow. "Do you make runs with opium?" Toby asked.

The Mongolian driver assured him that he did, for a price. Toby seemed unusually interested in this illegal trade. I had known about it for some time, for Gavin had told me that the British were involved with transporting it from India into China. That had been just before Gavin's disappearance, so I hadn't learned anything more. But I was thinking about it, and when a lull in the smoky room made everyone drowsy, I asked Toby if he'd known my brother.

"It would be hard working for Lord Gordon and not know your brother, or about his movements, Tawny. Yes. I knew Gavin. He was the very best of agents, trained in his skill. He will be a hard man to replace."

I swallowed hard. "Lord Gordon seemed to think that—that he just may be alive. Do you share this?" My voice was husky.

"I honestly don't know what to think on that score, Tawny. Do you know the circumstances, that is, the work he was involved in when he disappeared?" I shook my head, and he said, "Gavin was often over this trail, for his job was to intercept the illegal runs of opium by our own countrymen. Of course, we're sure David Markus is one of those drug traffickers, long suspected."

"I had no idea . . . you could know Gavin so well," I said, then gave a shallow laugh. "Nor did I know that he was involved with the opium traffic—that is, working toward that end," I said hurriedly.

"He was trained for this dangerous work, and he was one of our best at it. Everyone liked Gavin. I might as well tell you, Tawny, that this whole thing smells all the way through like an opium run, and that somewhere in Kashgar, or even east of it, your brother has come up against a hardcore organization determined to maintain the runs into Peiping and Shanghai. I'm convinced of it." His voice was low, thoughtful. He was not one who spoke out his thoughts too readily. "Markus. If we could just get to him—" He stopped, frowning, and absentmindedly began to fill his pipe.

I waited for him to go on, but whatever he'd been ready to say, there was no chance he'd do so, for as I glanced around us, other faces and ears were watching Toby and listening, even though very few of those drivers could speak English. It was eerie to say the least.

That night, I was restless and couldn't get to sleep easily, and I was glad when morning came. We left long before sunrise, yet I was anxious to leave the inn. That day, I had my first glimpse of one of the most magnificent mountains I had ever seen, and one which we were to see for many days and weeks to come.

Our guide Mirzah informed us Rakaposhi, Goddess of the Snows, held her peak proudly against a deep-blue sky. It was an awesome granite pyramid, mantled with snow, an unconquered titan of the Himalayas. Wisps of snow were whipping across its face, foretelling the closing of the passes when snow blocked them for the winter.

It was near midday of the following morning when, in a sudden turn of the trail, we had our first view of Baltit, a kingdom that was little known to the outside world. In the clean transparent air, the ancient castle towered before us.

We stopped to look in wonder at this magnificent scene; it was one of rare beauty, quite like a silk-screen painting. Baltit sat in a broad green valley, with terraced fields down to the banks of the Hunza River. Winter crops had been sown, and the new tender green was like a fine brush across the whole of the valley, with the mystic mountain always guarding it.

Toby was as silent as I was, and had I been inclined to paint, I am certain this was what would have inspired me. I was speechless to this beauty, knowing I was moved deeply by it. I wondered if Toby felt moved too, but when he spoke, it was not of the valley or of the mountain.

"I must confess that I'm uneasy. Tawny. From what I've been able to glean from those traders in the caravans we passed, the situation doesn't add up to anything except to intense greed. Markus is a fool to have placed Lady Bianca in reach of this Kirghiz chief. I understand that he would have no scruples, none whatsoever, in ransoming Lady Bianca's person for the highest bid. He would cut Markus's throat and think nothing of it—but a white woman!" It was as if he were speaking to himself as he went on.

"We just may have to push on from Baltit today. The border to the north is not far, but if the snows close the Delhi Sang Pass, we stand no chance in rescuing her. I suggest we stop long enough to get fresh mounts and supplies, and perhaps I'll see the Mir, the King of Hunza. I've heard from reliable sources that he is fond of the English, and he could give us support, if nothing else."

Even as he spoke, we saw the long-distance runner on the road below coming toward us. Toby gave our guide the signal to start our descent into the valley. An hour later, the runner met us, and he salaamed deeply to Toby, who had ridden ahead. I saw them in conversation, and when I rode up beside Toby, he said, "We are to go to the castle. It seems as though the Mir has been expecting us, and he has some important information. I don't like it. Someone from Gilgit must have known about our plans, and hurried to the Mir with them. This changes things."

His words struck a foreboding to my heart as our small caravan set out on the last mile before we reached the approach to the old fortress above the Hunza River.

The Mir of Hunza himself greeted us. He was a short man, squarely built, with dark hair and eyes and a ready smile. Dressed in a magnificent gown of gold brocade belted at the waist, with a gold-hilted sword in a scabbard of carved ivory at his side. A jeweled pin, surely made of emeralds, held a plume of egret feathers in place on his black hat. It was most impressive, I had to admit, and not at all the fearsome personage I had expected.

Mohammud Jamel Khan, a devout Moslem, ruled all of Hunza, as his ancestors did before him. He spoke flawless English, and received Toby and myself as though we had come as

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Were you the earth, dear love, and I the
skies,
My love would shine on you like to the
sun
And love upon you with ten thousand eyes
Till heaven waxed blind and till the
world were done.

Joshua Sylvester
Love's Omnipotence.

emissaries from Her Majesty the Queen of England, whom he admired so much.

"Welcome to our land," he said politely as he led us into the castle from the courtyard. He smiled, seeing our expressions when we came into the great hall. It was as though we'd stepped right down into the palace of some medieval Persian prince.

As we took our honored places on the deep silk cushions, a veiled woman came in and sat behind the Mir as inconspicuously as she could. She was his wife, the Rani of Hunza. We were given excellent tea in delicate jade bowls, and only when the Mir saw that we were enjoying our refreshment did he speak on the subject which had brought us here.

"One Englishman, David Markus, a merchant trader with a small caravan passing between India and Sinkiang, was brought to the castle last evening, Mr. Roberts," he said slowly. "He will survive from a most severe beating. We have given him special care. He was incoherent at first, but then he was able to give me the information that you would be arriving."

So, David Markus knew we were following him. I glanced at Toby to see how he'd received this piece of information, but he only inclined his head slightly to one side, and waited in polite dignity to hear all of what the Mir had to say.

"We understand that Khan Shayet was the man responsible for Mr. Markus's discomfiture. As far as I am able to judge, Khan Shayet left yesterday heading north toward the Delhi Sang Pass, and seemed to be in no particular rush to leave Hunza. He took Mr. Markus's small caravan, which I am to believe the squabble was all about in the first place."

Toby took his time, then he said, "We are here because we have information that a white lady, who was with the Englishman Markus, was taken captive by the Kirghiz chief. She is a close relation to Miss Butler." He gestured toward me, and I had to appreciate the lie. "We fear for her life. If she is harmed in any way, I assure you that Her Royal Highness, our Queen, will be apprised of this matter. If you can give us information about this matter, I shall be obliged. We must rescue her from this notorious bandit."

The Mir smiled. "Then we shall discover together what is being said and what has indeed happened to the white woman." He clapped his hands, and a servant came immediately, kneeling at his side. The Mir spoke quickly in Urdu, and after giving the man full instructions, the servant rose, salaamed deeply to his master as well as to Toby, then turned and ran out of the hall. "You will want rooms, Miss Butler. It will be a few hours before we can have word, and until then, I would have you make yourself comfortable. When you are relaxed, Mr. Roberts will come for you, and two hours before sundown we shall have a special entertainment which you both are invited to attend. Please allow my servant to show you the way."

"Thank you, Your Highness," I said. "You are most gracious." Toby stood up and helped me to my feet. "Rest as well as you can, Tawny," he said in a low voice close to my ear. "I want to talk with Markus, and then set out as quickly as possible. I'll come for you." I nodded and then followed the servant who was waiting for me.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed that the Rani, her bright-pink silk veil like a mist floating around her, had risen; she did a feminine salaam to her lord and husband, then slipped from the room in another direction, making no sound whatsoever in those strange leather shoes with curled-up toes.

I gave myself up to the moment at hand, and made use of the luxury I'd been denied for weeks, and which the pretty maids of Hunza's generous Mir brought me. Hot scented water in a huge copper tub to sink my whole body into, and while I soaked, they took my clothes away to clean.

I tried not to dwell on the sense of foreboding uneasiness that hovered about me; it was relaxing to lather my skin with the lavender soap I brought out of my pack, and to rinse it all with hot water and plenty of it. I let my tense mind just flow with the steam and the soap, but even so, I thought of Bianca.

It was true I hadn't had much time to dwell on the indignant jolt I'd felt when I learned of her deception. Because she had seemed the innocent victim of her brother's vicious, hard-hearted assessment of her character, I had blindly trusted her. But her deception backfired, and it was no use in accusing her now. I wanted to help her out of this bad situation, even if it meant that she would be united with her lover and not go to her brother. I wanted to remember the impetuousness of her youth above all.

When I stepped free of the bath and rubbed my body dry with a thick clean towel, I was given an elaborate silk and soft wool costume to wear: pantaloons that billowed out under the warm tunic of soft cream cashmere, stitched in fine embroidery and trimmed elaborately with fur. A pale lemony green silk scarf attached to a small yellow velvet hat which sat on my head, swathed about my face and hair in a gauzy effect. I felt as though I had stepped back into a sultan's harem when I saw my reflection in the mirror.

I had time now to study the room I had been given; it too was very seductive; rich brocaded silk hung from ceiling to floor over the walls, and Persian carpets thick and glowing in stunning colors covered the floors. Every conceivable pattern and color was in those carpets, and they stirred all that poetry and romance I'd felt when I first came into the Himalayas.

As I stood there I heard someone enter the room behind me and I turned. It was Toby, and like a fresh breath of that almost frosty air, he came over to where I stood. I saw at once that he too had been given time to have a bath and now wore a clean shirt and jacket.

"Tawny, I have just been to see Markus." He spoke with a deliberated dislike toward the man. "His injuries are not serious. Bruised more than anything, but no bones are broken, as far as he knows. He took a beating, but by gad, he deserved one for jeopardizing Lady Bianca as he has done!"

I waited, for I could see he had much on his mind. That he believed Markus had sold Bianca out in an act of cowardice had been evident by the way he'd been talking, and it was what I'd feared too. "Did he . . . say what . . . happened?" I finally asked.

"He asked to see you, Tawny. He knew we were coming, and it was as I suspected. Someone in Gilgit had known of our intentions and came ahead of us. Spies are everywhere." He smiled, but there was no warmth in it, as he leaned against the parapet on the balcony. The late sun's golden rays touched his beard, glinting off it. He sighed heavily, a frown between his brows.

"I have a nasty little suspicion that all this was planned, set up, like a trap, and I don't like it. I distrust Markus more than ever. Lady Bianca is in the hands of that cutthroat Kirghiz because he had no regard for her safety of her person, to my way of thinking, but it was done for a peculiar reason, and I am not yet certain just what that reason is.

"Markus told me that he did not know what happened; he hadn't wanted to have anything to do with Khan Shayet, and went out of his way to avoid him. He said they were suddenly attacked, and that he was knocked unconscious and kicked around some. When he regained consciousness, someone had carried him to the castle and thus he came to the Mir's attention. Of course, now he knows Lady Bianca is Khan Shayet's captive, for the Mir's servant returned with the facts."

"So he didn't desert her, as we feared?" But my heart sank with fear.

"I'd say it was a good case of desertion, but then, I am being unjust, because I am thinking of her situation, not his. He seemed far more anxious for that damned caravan of his than for Lady Bianca. He even tried to convince me that she would not suffer badly at the hands of Khan Shayet. That is why he wants to talk with you, Tawny."

"Of course. I'll see him. But have you any idea of why Khan Shayet took Bianca captive, if not to use her, or to barter her for a ransom?" I was puzzled, for I did not yet see clearly what Toby suspected.

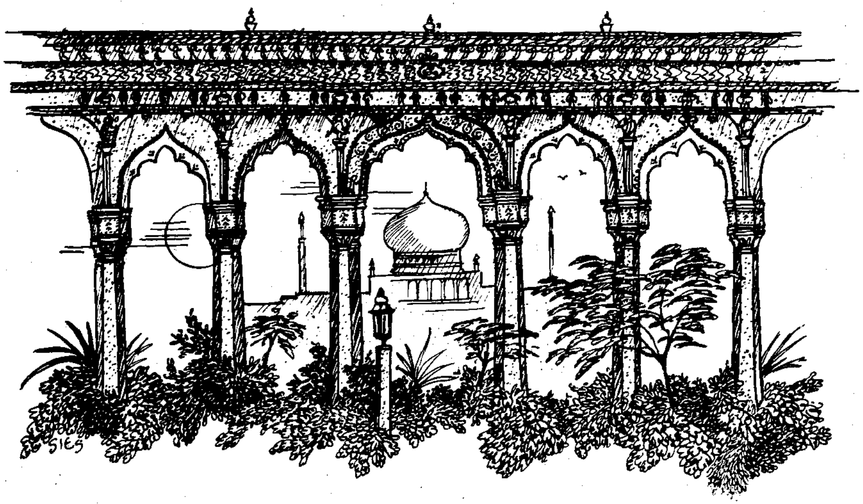
He was quiet, but his eyes like his beard were glinting in the light. "If I don't miss my guess, Tawny, I'd say we are all being drawn to the Kirghiz, with Lady Bianca as the bait. It's that simple, but I don't quite know just why. But I'll soon find out if I have to throttle Markus's neck, damn him!"

Before I could say anything, however, Toby reached out and took my hand, pulling me to him. "We are leaving here in a few hours, Tawny. The Mir has offered us a small party of his men, and we're riding out after Lady Bianca. Markus insists on coming with us. Personally, I don't think he is up to it. But he deserves to suffer in no little way for having brought her to this."

I was surprised that he kept his hand on mine; it was big and warm and comforting, yet I was blushing like a schoolgirl. But he went on talking.

"It will be dangerous, Tawny my girl. The Mir has offered you sanctuary here in his castle. I would feel better about it—"

I held up my hand and moved out of his closeness a short step away from him. "I won't hear of it, Toby. No. I must go with you. There is no question about it, and I'm prepared to do so, dangerous or not. Bianca will need me once we get to her. And I want to be there when she is rescued. I must. Besides, I somehow *know* she can't really be safe with that bandit, not from what I've heard from Gavin. I must be there."



Oh, much later, it was an overwhelming emotion when I thought back to that swift impetuous decision! And I would not allow myself to even suppose what might have been had I not insisted that I go along with Toby and David Markus! But even so, I could not have done otherwise. I wanted go. To stay behind would have meant anxiety for me.

Toby just looked at me with that quiet manner of his, but I was aware of his respect and something else, which brought me pleasure. My own feelings for this man had begun to grow, and in this moment, our feelings seemed mutual and ripe. I read into his look everything I wanted to know.

"You are a courageous woman, Tawny. It's what I expected you to say, and against my better judgment. But"—he smiled suddenly, radiant in the warm light—"I am glad you will be beside me."

He gave me a long slow look, and I suddenly felt beautiful under his gaze, for he noticed the Persian costume I was wearing.

"It suits you, yes. That long tunic is designed for women like you, I think. The way you walk is very Western and noticeable but I'm attracted to it."

I laughed, very much pleased. "Perhaps I should acquire a chedari, one of those long robes which Bianca wore? It would hide me well enough."

"Hmn-mn. Well, it did not quite hide her well enough, it seems, nor would it disguise your exceptional figure, I should think." He moved over to my side, and placed his hands on my arms, pulling me to him. I never knew just how it happened, but in the next instant I was in his arms, and he was kissing my mouth with such tenderness, and then with such sudden and fierce passion, that it surprised me.

When he lifted his head and looked down into my eyes, I read the message I saw in them. "Nor would I ever want you hidden from me, my dear girl. Tawny. I must speak to you about—"

A short,loud clap of hands broke us apart, and we turned, almost guiltily, to face a dark-eyed servant in the doorway, and behind him, coming in, was the tall, slender, bearded Englishman. He spoke in quick Urdu to the manservant, who turned and bowed himself out of the room.

The man faced us. "I beg your forgiveness to intrude upon you so untimely. It seems I had to bribe my way into this part of the castle, but I felt it urgent that I speak with you both."

Toby frowned and gestured to him to come out onto the balcony to join us.

David Markus was younger than I supposed he would be, perhaps a year or so younger than myself. He was tall, with a certain lion strength in his slender build, and his hair was black, matching the beard as well as his eyes. There were dark circles around those piercing black eyes, nor did I see any joy light up in them as he shook my hand. His clothes were of Russian style so that he resembled a Cossack.

"Miss Butler. May I say this, that I am most pleased that you have come out here, and in the interest of Bianca? I can't tell you just how relieved I am that you are here. I have no doubts that Khan Shayet is expecting me to come after her. And when we do rescue her, she will be in need of someone like you."

It was a surprising speech, and it moved me. "Then I'm glad to be of such use, Mr. Markus," I said, almost humbly. We stood on the balcony together, the late afternoon sun thick with motes of dust dancing like gold around us, and there was much speculation among the three of us.

Toby was rather gruff when he spoke. "As our interests lie solely with the concern of Lady Bianca, Markus, it would help matters if you could tell us exactly what it is this Kirghiz chief wants from you so badly that he took your caravan and Lady Bianca, knowing you would come after them? I have no intention of getting involved with illicit merchant trading. My purpose in being here is to find Lady Bianca. And so help me, I want to find her safe."

I couldn't blame Toby. I knew he felt unsure of the situation, and therefore would not trust David Markus. Indeed, if Khan Shayet had the caravan, which obviously was a source of weath in what it contained, either opium or other illicit goods, why would he be enticing Markus to follow him, using Bianca as the bait, as Toby had suggested?

But Markus was not going to give up his secrets, not that kind and not in my hearing; instead, he gave Toby a knowing look, then in a strange little awkward moment, he said, "I beg you to understand, both of you, when I say this. Bianca is . . . well. She is with child. My child. Four months gone. That is why I must get to her. The Kirghiz chief won't harm her, unless he doesn't get what he wants. But he will use her. Oh, my God, and how he will use her!"

The man suddenly lost control and began shaking. His whole body began to tremble visibly, and he could not stop it.

I could have sworn that Toby was about to strike him because his fists were clenched, his face had blanched and his mouth tightened. But Toby was not a man who acted rashly. "Take it easy, old man," he said gruffly, and I knew he was covering up his own soft heart. I was moved to tears. "Let me assure you. We are going out after her, and every second counts."

David stood with his back to the parapet to brace his shaking body. "Miss Butler. I believe you are the sister to Gavin Butler, are you not?"

I was taken aback. "Yes. Of course. Do you know my brother?" I felt as if the breath had been knocked out of me. I saw Toby tense beside me.

"Yes. I know your brother. He goes under an assumed name, but nevertheless I am well acquainted with him."

Every nerve inside me was pulsating; I wanted wanted to find out if he knew Gavin's whereabouts, but I had a warning look from Toby. David steadied himself, and the trembling of his body ceased. "God, if I only knew what happened to him! Everything depended on his being where we planned to meet! I am sure the Kirghiz is responsible, and this—all this is his way of drawing me to his camp on the Little Pamir. I know he is heading there. We must try to get to them before the snows start, Roberts." He turned to face a steely-eyed Toby. "Once the snows come, Delhi Sang Pass will bar us from our return or prevent us from getting to Bianca."

I was surprised; that Gavin was involved with Markus as well as the Kirghiz chief seemed almost ludicrous, especially after the praises sung by Toby that my brother had been above all this!

But Toby said, "Then I suggest that we go to my rooms. I have some brandy that will steady you. We'll need you along to guide us, Markus." He looked at me. "Tawny. Have all your things readied. I'll come back in a short while, and we'll go to see what the Mir has planned for us. But afterward, we shall depart."

When they left me, I knew I was disturbed more than ever, and restless. So much was on my mind. My thoughts went to Bianca. She was pregnant, and in the hands of that renegade Kirghiz. A cold hand clutched at my heart as I thought of her plight. Oh, she had been sly and had fooled Toby and me, but all that I could forgive and I did. Perhaps David Markus did love Bianca; certainly he seemed genuinely anxious for her. But with that love, he should never have jeopardized her safety.

The maids entered with my clothes, which they had taken to clean for me. Although it had been only a few short hours, my homespun skirt and shirts, with the underskirts as well, were freshly laundered and ironed. It pleased me so much that I searched around in my pack for three small cakes of lavender soap and gave them each one. They giggled and smiled with delight. I laughed with them.

I set about to change my costume for my own thick tawny-colored homespun skirt and the shirt, tucking it into the waistband neatly, and then pulled on the soft leather boots. As I did so, I was surprised when I glanced up to see the Rani, the Mir's lovely wife, coming into the room, with her maid following the billowing cloud of pink veil. Behind that veil, she was smiling, and I stood up to meet her, bowing even as she bowed politely, then waved to her maid to come forward.

In her arms she carried a lovely soft suede fur-lined tunic, deep-brown leather so soft to the touch it was like silk, fashioned to be worn over my clothes as a long coat.

"You will need warmth," she said proudly in a few chosen words of English, surprising me. "The Mir of Hunza, as well as the Rani"—she bowed her lovely shining black-haired head gracefully, indicating herself—"wishes you to have this. It will be very cold where you go. Please."

Astounded, I could only lift the lovely tunic coat, which was lined in thick fur. With it was a fur hat of some light-tawny shade of the tunic's fur. She proudly watched my every movement. I was stunned, for it was the most incredibly luxurious gift I'd ever received from anyone.

Because she waited with such expectancy, I slipped it over my clothes to find that it did indeed fit my figure as if it had been made especially for me. Then I stood in front of the mirror and placed the hat on my head, setting it down with much show, which delighted the maids and the Rani. The hat was beautiful, and behind me were great sighs of pleased admiration and laughter.

I could see that the Rani was eyeing my old cloak. I had hung it upon a hook when I first arrived, and now, impulsively, I brought it to her and asked if she would like to try it on. It was of dark-green wool, lined in yellow silk. Nothing could have pleased her more. It was English-made, heavy, warm and with a hood. When her maid helped her into the cloak, we both stood in front of the mirror admiring ourselves and preened like peacocks, and I started to laugh.It was a marvelous moment, and one I shall never forget.

I asked her then if she would accept the cloak as my gift to her. And with this our mutual friendship was sealed.

Uuntil after we'd crossed the high Delhi Sang Pass in the Karakoram Range and reached the Wakhan Corridor to the gates of China, five long days later, our journey was a nightmare I could never put from my mind if I tried.

Relentlessly our guides pushed us on ahead, stopping every two hours for a thirty-minute break and then moving on again. We had exchanged our horses for yaks, great shaggy beasts with rope reins tied to the rings in their noses. They were clumsy-looking giants, but they walked nearly as fast as the horses, and were far more surefooted in those snowy passes we found ourselves in. I could feel the giant heart of the beast beating under the warm lambskin saddle I rode in.

We followed the Kirghiz chief just as if he were beckoning to us with his finger. It was uncanny to learn that Khan Sahyet had waited for us, and that when he knew we were following him, he would give us the slip and go through the Delhi Sang Pass barely a day ahead of us.

The Mir's men were excellent guides, and it was because of their superb knowledge of this high country that our lives were saved. When we stopped to rest, we had to lie down while the tea was made and given to us. The altitude was tremendously high, and my heart seemed to burst with its rapid beating. We lay prone on our backs, and when we were given the yak-butter tea, it revived us so that we could continue onward.

I sensed the urgency of the men to get us through the pass and return; I saw their faces as they looked at the mountains. It was already October, and we would not stand a chance to get back through this sinister and awesome mountain pass before the big snows closed it.

We were through the pass and going down when, during one of the breaks, Toby came to me. "That Kirghiz chief has something up his sleeve, and I don't like the feel of it." He spoke slowly, confidingly. "He's just been baiting us, and I know he means to have us on his ground before he makes his move. We can surprise him, for he knows just how far we are behind him. It is uncannily deliberate and cunning of him."

"What do you intend to do, then?" I tried to act calmly.

"I'm not sure. We can't rush them. That would be useless. There are too many of them to our few. But tonight, we shall be within reach of his camp. Markus knows we're that close. Damn him! He's holding back something that I don't know! He is closed up like a clam."

I shivered in spite of myself. "What did he have to say of my brother, Toby? I'm certain that he must know something about Gavin that Lord Gordon might not know. Did he say anything more on the subject?" To know that Gavin was not lying dead somewhere with his throat slit, I would have given much.

Toby's eyes held mine fiercely. "Look here, my dear girl. I believe we are on the brink of some rich discoveries we didn't bargain for. If there was a way for your brother to get out of a bad situation, you can count on it, he will have done so. Just remember. I am here with you in any situation. Let's just first concentrate on getting to Lady Bianca and get the hell out of here before it's too late.

"But, my dear girl"—he took a step nearer to me, lowering his voice—"you must promise me to be careful. Whatever you do, stay close to me and be ever so careful. I don't like this situation. It smells too much like a trap. I shall warn Jaseen to never lose sight of you. If what I think is about to happen, happens, then Jaseen's duty is to get you back to Baltit should the worst come to pass."

Fear twisted around my heart in a crazy grip of pain. "Toby! Nothing must go wrong. Don't—please don't talk like that—"

"Don't be frightened, my dear girl. I'm being cautious, and it's always best to be prepared for anything."

There was no more time to speak, however, for our guides, bandoleered with rifles on their backs, beckoned to us that it was time to move on.

It was not until we made camp at nightfall within the shelter of an ancient stone-and-mud hut, abandoned by its former tenants, that Toby and David made their plans known to each other and to me. David Markus had kept his own counsel during the five days we'd been out of Baltit. That he was suffering a strange torment within himself I had no doubts; he was like a man possessed to get to Khan Shavet's camp across the Panj, and he had often been surly when our guides made us stop. This night he was no different. He and Toby quarreled hotly over their plans.

We were seated around the fire pit in the small mud-walled room, chewing on the walnuts and dried fruit which had become our staple diet, the inevitable strong yak-butter tea warming us. Toby and Markus sat cross-legged across the pit from each other, while I was almost drowsing, staring into the flames. Toby stuffed tobacco into his pipe, plainly ready to talk sense into the younger man's plan of stealing into the camp that night.

It began to snow without warning; big flakes came down through the opening in the roof, and sputtered and sizzled on the crackling logs. I saw eyes meet eyes, and I knew they too knew we had no time to lose, but had to act tonight if we had any hopes of getting back over that route we'd just crossed.

"I will go alone," David said darkly, his black eyes strangely still in the flickering yellow light. "When the hour grows late, I will go. I will have less chance of being seen then. There's no need for both of us to enter Khan Shayet's camp."

"You're mad," Toby said. "It's unthinkable. I haven't come this far to make a bungled-up rescue. No. We've got to have a sound and reasonable plan. It's a trap, a set up; he's no fool. Even if you went in there, what good would that do in releasing Lady Bianca? Our cause would be lost."

The fire flickered and cast a garish yellow color on the smoke-blackened walls of the hut. I poured more tea from the heavy brass samovar into the empty bowls and passed them around again.

Toby said suddenly: "Where do you reckon he will have placed her?"

"There's no doubt about that. She'll be in the big yurt with all his women. It will be the largest one. They keep in there for warmth."

"Then, damn it! We'll have a hard time of getting her out without attracting attention. So we must distract the whole damn camp in some unforeseen plan." He continued to frown, leaning forward slightly, his face a study of calculation.

David spoke then, very quietly, and made his point. "There is one way, if I can make you see the reasoning in it. I will distract their attention, Roberts, in order to give you enough time to get into that yurt where she is. But you'd have to act quickly; even that would be risky, for she could be bound, and some of those women inside would be guarding her, and they can fight like devils.

"But however you look at it, it's going to be a touch-and-go thing. It's me Khan Shayet wants to get at, not you or the Mir's men. Don't forget that. And he won't let Bianca go free until he has his hands on just what he wants." He spoke with such bitterness that it surprised me.

"And that being?" Toby shot at him. For no reason at all, his words sent a prickle of fear over my whole being.

But David was not so free with his secrets.

After a brief silence, he looked at me and said quite unexpectedly:

"Miss Butler. Are you willing to be a part of this plan?" He stared at me, holding my gaze unwaveringly.

"Yes, of course," I said without hesitation.

"Very well. Now we may just have a plan that could be successful, Roberts. But it is all based on complete surprise, which the Kirghiz won't suspect until it's too late."

"Let's hear it, then," Toby said, sitting back, his eyes narrowed through the smoke haze.

"I will take Miss Butler with me into Khan Shayet's camp. It won't be as dangerous as it sounds, and they won't be expecting it. They won't have gone into their yurts as yet, but will be out in the open ring. Bianca, of course, will be in the big yurt with the women, Khan Shayet's women, for they retire long before the men do.

"Taking you with me, Miss Butler, will throw them into confusion, and I can almost guarantee that you will be taken immediately to that yurt where she is. Your part will be to rouse her, find out if she is bound or not. Most likely, she will be in the rear of the tent, farthest from the door.

"But remember this: those women will be guarding her, for they will consider her their enemy. They don't comprehend English, but they are clever enough to understand actions. So do a lot of talking, but without your hands. Less action until the ripe moment when Roberts comes. Be warned, though, of those women. They can fight like wild animals.

"Roberts, Khan Shayet will want to deal with me, and you must take your position behind the big yurt as quickly as possible when we leave you. One of the men can give you the signal. Then, you make your move swiftly and don't waste a second. That is all you'll have, just seconds, to get her out of that yurt—and don't wait, not for anything. Once the alarm is out, the whole horde will be clamoring for blood."

Approval of the plan was written on Toby's face, but he said nothing. I spoke what was on my mind. "And how will you escape, David?"

"Don't you worry about that, Miss Butler. I plan to distract the Kirghiz and his men with the only weapon I know. Trust me. Just see that Bianca gets out of there."

It didn't convince me, and I looked at Toby. He crossed his arms and said thoughtfully, "Well, it seems a sound enough plan, Markus. It's all we have, in any case. I'm all for it."

"Then we ought not wait much longer. They know we're here, but what they can't know is our plan. And we've got the snow for cover. Roberts, when you've got Bianca, get the hell out of there, and once back here, start back through the pass. Tomorrow will be too late. Every second from this minute on counts. Don't forget it."

He stood up then, and without another word, he strode from the room. I was almost stunned by the valor the man was capable of. He was sacrificing his own safety for that of all of us!

Toby spoke to Jaseen and Gulam, his own man. "Be ready when we return. We shall take three men with us, and two will stay behind to have those animals ready. Jaseen, you and Gulam make certain the packs are safe. We should be back well before dawn. Be waiting."

Then Toby turned to me. "Here is a weapon you must have, Tawny. Put it down inside your boot and, for your sake, use it if you have to."

He brought out a dagger, hardly five inches in length, but out of its sheath, the blade gleamed deadly in the firelight. "You aren't afraid, are you?" He suddenly covered my hand with his. "You must use it. Don't hesitate."

Shuddering with revulsion, I lifted my skirts and slipped the slender weapon, sheathed, down inside the fur-lined boot as he watched me.

We started out, the snow blurring our vision as we left our camp behind. We dared not take animals, for they would give away our presence too soon.

After an hour of walking, Markus left us, taking one of the Hunzukuts with him. He was back in less than ten minutes.

"I was right. The men are in the ring outside the yurts. The big one, Khan Shayet's yurt, is set apart from the other smaller ones. It should be easy to come up from behind. One last-minute reminder, Miss Butler. When you do get inside the yurt, call Bianca's name, then move quickly to the back of the tent. You must warn her. And remember what I said about the women."

I nodded my head. Toby stood beside me and I felt his hand on my arm, encouragingly. "And don't forget what I said, my dear girl. Use that knife. Take care."

I smiled. "I'll take care, Toby. Rest easy." And then I turned and found Markus's hand on my arm, guiding me through the trees, with one of the Hunzukuts behind us, while Toby and the two others would follow in five minutes. We walked some yards away into the thin outer edge of the trees, and then, giving a signal to the man behind us to stop, David led me a few feet further along, just to where the yurts rose in deep shadows in the curtained snow. Then he stopped and turned to face me, very close. "Miss Butler," he whispered. "I want your promise of something."

"Of course," I said recklessly. "What is it?"

"If something should go badly wrong, I want you to take Bianca to her brother. I must rely on your promise. I can see that you have what is considered common sense about you, and Bianca does not have such a virtue. She acts before she thinks, but then, she is such a child. She will need you. Take her to her brother."

I was filled with dread, and no little surprised. "You speak as if you don't intend to be with us," I said, my heart hammering so loudly that I could hardly hear myself speak.

But he was not listening to me, pulling something out of his inside breast pocket. "Take this. It will be safe with you. Give it to Lord Gordon when you see him. But know one thing, Miss Butler. I made Bianca my wife before all this began. The child is legitimate. Our marriage document is with this packet and—other valuables. Please see that they reach Lord Gordon Harding. I must have your promise to take her to that safety."

He thrust the packet into my hands, and I barely had time to stuff it down inside the long pocket made into the fur lining of my tunic. "But—of course I promise. Yet you wil be with us, with her! You must!"

He smiled; even in the gray blackness of night, I saw that smile, and a terrible dread filled me.

"Trust no one else with that packet, Miss Butler, and don't be frightened. Remember this. Tobias Roberts is a sure bet on getting through in the very thick of things. Count on it. And, I will tell you something else, if it will relieve your mind. Your brother is not dead. But I don't know where he is. He was onto something really big. But we've not more time."

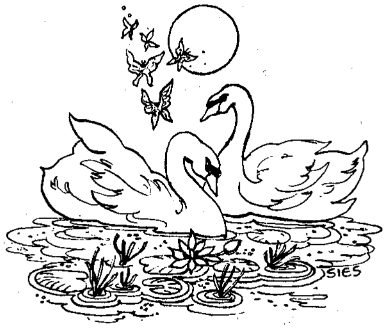
As we approached the open ring, I saw the big fire pit dug in the hard ground, over which hung a spit with a lump of charred ibex still sizzling, and with men eating great hunks of it. The snow fell, hitting on the flames, and blue-black smoke, acrid and tantalizing, curled up into the dark broad faces around it all.

It seemed to happen all at once. I glanced around me, and saw that we were surrounded by the bandoleered forms like a wall closing in on us. "Don't be afraid," David whispered close to my ear. "It's all right. I promise you."

Nothing in my past life could have prepared me for this moment, however: David Marcus faced the big Kirghiz chieftain, with me by his side. Those dark, glittering eyes moved from David's face to mine with a surprised expression on his face. David had been right; the man was confused; it showed openly for that brief moment.

He stood with his legs apart; they were wrapped in sheepskin, and strapped in leather. His fur-trimmed tunic gave him a regal look, but his head was bald as that of a bronze god. With a flick of his fingers, I was suddenly seized from behind. I gasped in the sudden terror of it, but David turned and gave me a swift look.

That look sobered me more than anything could have done in that moment. The Kirghiz was not interested in me; it was David Markus whom he wanted.



I couldn't have struggled had I wanted to, nor did I cry out as I was taken from that eerie scene. I'll always remember that it was the last I ever saw of David Markus. I could have sworn that he had planned it all the way it happened that night. And I never saw such blatant fearlessness as he faced that big Kirghiz chieftain that night. He was braver than any man I knew.

I was taken to the large yurt and roughly thrust inside, and the flaps of the tent were stretched down tightly again on the outside by the guard.

Except for the burning yak dung in the center brazier, the interior was dark, just light enough for me to see the forms of several women and children already bedded for the night.

"Bianca!" I cried out. "Where are you?"

A form sat up suddenly in the rear of the tent. "Tawny? Oh, Tawny Butler! Is that really you?" And to my amazement, she stumbled up from the masses of fur rugs and ran to me, throwing herself into my arms. She was crying. "I didn't ever guess that you'd come, not this far!" Her voice broke on a low sob.

"Don't fret over what is done, Bianca," I said, my own voice catching. But I remembered what David warned me of, and hurried on. "We haven't much time. Take me back to your sleeping place. Quickly." I glanced around me and saw the curious faces of some of the women, who were now sitting up on their pallets of fur.

"Tell me quickly. Are you all right? Have they—harmed you in anyway?"

"No. The women have been rough, but I have my maid with me. For the most part, we're both left alone. Did—David—come with you?"

"Oh, yes. Toby and the Hunzukut men are about to rescue us. So be prepared. It could be any moment now. We must get back to the rear of the tent." It was a large tent; I glanced around and believed I saw animosity as well as distrust in those faces closest to us.

Bianca solved much of this distrust by insisting that I lie down with her in the pile of fur rugs she had been sleeping on. At first, I thought this was unwise, but then I realized it was to slip unnoticed into her own fur-lined tunic and boots, which she had removed when she first lay down, and to strap a long flat leather pouch to her waist beneath the tunic, unseen by those beautifully untamed eyes in the faces of a proud nomadic tribe of women.

We lay fully dressed under the furs, waiting listening, talking. Bianca told me that the woman next to us was a Hunzukut girl who had been taken with her. She said, "Her name is Chanda, and David wanted me to have her in any case. She came with us from Gilgit. She must go with us tonight, Tawny. I will not leave her behind.

"I'm pregnant, Tawny," Bianca whispered."And I'm frightened. Whatever happens, please never hold this against David."

"I never shall, Bianca. You can count on that," I said softly.

The minutes crawled by; I had no idea of the time that was passing, or of the drama that must be going on in full outside in that ring. It seemed hours since I'd left Toby and stood with David out there in the veil of snow. I strained my ears for any sound that would tell me Toby was near, but no sound like that came. My heart thundered madly as I listened. I knew I had to stay awake and keep Bianca and Chanda alert too for what was to come.

The sudden and furious beat of drums filled the night outside the yurt, and with it bloodcurdling cries, and a thunderous sound of horses rushing into the camp. In the next frenzied second, all pandemonium broke loose; all the women in the yurt scrambled up from their pallets, and their wild screams at each other deafened any other sound that might have come.

Bianca and I stood up, the Hunzukut woman beside us, and we watched in horror as that front door flap was torn open and a blazing torch was flung inside; in that instant, I heard a familiar voice ring out behind us, "Tawny! For God's sake, get the woman and get the hell out of here!"

I turned, my heart plunged downward in one great thump. It was Gavin! "We've a God-given split second in all this hell turned loose!" He shouted, but no one in that flame-lit tent heard him or cared as I gave Bianca and her maid a push through the opening, and stepped free myself.

Snow was driving sheets around the camp, and those murderous yells were coming from men on horseback, waving great curved swords in the air; it was a nightmare beyond belief.

We ran across the frozen ground, and I noticed Toby was not with Gavin even as we ran down the slope to the edge of the trees. By that time, the snow hid the horrible scene, so garishly unreal behind us.

"It's a raiding party of a rival tribe, totally unexpected, but by God, how timely!" Gavin said close to my ear. "But we've no time to spare. Hurry on! Follow the guide." He grabbed Bianca's arm, and one of the men took hold of Chanda's. But I screamed out, "Gavin! Where's Toby?" even as I ran ahead after our guide.

"Don't worry. He's with—helping Markus! Hurry, Tawny! Don't waste one precious second!"

How we made it back to our shelter, where Jaseen and Gulam were waiting with the two other men and the yaks, I simply don't remember. The night had thickened with the snow, and we piled into those lambskin saddles; single file, with each yak roped to the other, we struck out for the hills. I held out for the hope that Toby was coming along with Markus, and would reach us before we were lost to them.

I did not know when they caught up with us, for it was a blind time, trusting only the surefooted yaks and the guides. I suppose it was near dawn when our guides stopped us for a rest, making hot tea with such skill in all that driving snow that I had to marvel. We fell off our saddles too exhausted to speak, and I saw that Bianca and her maid were content to sink into their fur rugs, huddled together, and, I suppose, sleep.

But I searched around to see Gavin; I didn't see him, but to my delight, I saw Toby. "Toby! I—I was given a shock back there, you know!" I couldn't keep the gladness from my voice.

He placed his arm around my shoulders, and I felt his snowy beard against my cheek for a moment. Then he held me off. "Gavin's gone back there," he said. And I heard the grim tone in his voice. "Markus won't be coming. He was brutally murdered, just before those drums began and the raid surprised them all. It was an atrocious act." He gripped my arms, holding me close enough so that I could see his face clearly.

No One Can Tell Of Love

by Cheryl Rilly

Go now,
and tell no one of our meeting.
Quietly,
repeat it to yourself.
For moments
like these are too splendid to share.
Let others
taste it for themselves.

* * *

I was stunned, and I felt the tears sting my eyelids somewhere in the blinding, stinging cold of the snow.

"But just as that happened, and the drums beating, the raiding party descended on the camp. And, by God, Tawny, if I didn't know better, I would have said that tribe might have been trying to save poor Markus. In fact, I'm almost sure of this, for your brother was the instigator of it all, no doubt about it, but perhaps there were scores to be settled between those two tribes. There's much I don't know.

"We can't waste time, though. For Khan Shayet didn't get what he was after, and he believes it will be with us. We've got to make it over the pass, regardless. Our lives depend on it."

I remembered David's smile, his words, and the packet he'd given me. My heart was wrung with sudden sorrow for him. "Where is Gavin, Toby? I was stunned when—when David told me that he knew Gavin wasn't dead, but that he didn't really know where he was! And how strange that it should be Gavin tonight, of all people! I must know why he was there, so—" Toby put a warning finger on my lips.

"We'll know in good time, my dear girl. Gavin has gone back to cover our trail, I believe. And don't worry if he does not follow. There's much I don't know but would give a lot to know. Who is the woman with Lady Bianca?"

"She's Bianca's maid. A Hunzukut woman."

"Providence, I'd say. She will need her."

I suddenly remembered Bianca. "Oh. She—she can't know about David," I said thickly. "She won't even suspect—" I couldn't finish, for my throat was tight.

"It's just as well. She can be told later. If you like, I will tell her."

"I'd like to be with you when you do," I said, trying not to show the deep feelings I had about David Markus.

"Tawny. Did Markus speak to you before you went into that camp."

"Yes. He told me that he and Bianca are married. And, he asked me if I would take her to her brother. He made me promise that, as if he knew what would take place. I'm sure of that now."

"And is that all he said?"

"He—he told me about Gavin—" I was about to say that he had also given me the packet containing the marriage documents and other valuables, but Jaseen brought us our bowls of yak-butter tea, and we gave ourselves to this moment. I glanced back to see that one of the men was rousing Bianca and Chanda for their tea.

I stirred myself to go to Bianca, but Toby held me back and we sank down on the rug, in the shelter beside one of the shaggy yaks, protecting us from the snow, and drank our tea slowly, saying nothing more.

The snowstorm did not cease, but quickened in its fury down through the pass, and we were caught in its thickening belt. It was treacherous every step. Our guides were methodically struggling to keep the yaks on the trail, and I never even guessed how close we came to going over the precipices, for they were hidden by the curtain of snow.

I didn't know when day came or when night fell and ended; indeed, I couldn't even say how many days and nights that we were on that trail. It seemed to go on and on, and no one complained that we were frozen, exhausted and even faint from the high altitude, our faces blackened by the stinging snow.

It was somewhere in all this thickness that Toby learned of the pursuing tribesmen behind us. They were closing in, he whispered in my ear, and although I was fearful, I was also numb to feelings.

It was dark like nighttime when, hours later, our small party stumbled blindly into a sheltered courtyard where a lamp was glowing, hung above a thick timbered doorway. We were helped down off our saddles, and taken inside a room lit only by the fire pit. But even as I gratefully sank into a numbed black oblivion, I realized that Toby was not with us.

Just how long he and Gulam, along with the Hunzukut warriors, had been gone, I could not know, but Toby had disappeared back on that trail.

Days and weeks passed into months. Bianca suffered severely from the effects of that dramatic flight. It was many weeks afterward that I knew she had pneumonia, and I feared for her life. Grief was with me during those anxious days; it hung about my heart and my mind like some great bird hovering over me.

But time went on in that little home just outside a village in the foothills of northernmost Hunza as though the world outside it had ceased to exist.

The farmer, Nazar, and his wife welcomed us. Because Chanda was with us, she could tell them of our plight, and they understood that our men had somehow suffered the same fate at the hands of the warring tribesmen as her own young husband. I learned that Chanda, too, was pregnant, but she began to look after Bianca with a peculiar attachment I thought was beautiful.

Jaseen had made himself useful in the out-of-doors with Nazar; and after a time, I began to help Nazar's wife, Soni, prepare our simple meal. Meanwhile, I waited for Bianca to recover, and anxiously waited for some sign of Toby and Gavin. My own health had stood up well after those first few weeks of arriving. But Bianca lay on the piled quilts in a small alcove, incoherent with fever and illness. When finally Bianca opened her eyes to a dazed state of living, I knew she would recover and I found reason then to rejoice.

We became friends; she was like a younger sister to me, and I cherished her more than ever and beyond my imagination. The time came when she was well enough for me to tell her of David's death. She took it with great forbearance, and I was proud of her resilience in accepting what could not be changed. And even when I told her that I did not know what had become of Toby or Gavin, she tried to cheer me with hope to believe the best and not the worst.

As she gained her strength, the days went by quickly, and we talked of our families, of each other, and of our hopes. Each day, the child she was carrying grew, and she talked of the baby. I told her of the man I had once adored—had eight years gone by since I loved Neil Pearson?—who shattered me by marrying someone else.

She listened quietly, her eyes large and wide and almost purple in their blue depths. It was when I told her of Lindsey Ash, that she looked stunned and cried out, "Oh, Tawny! I know her, and I hate her! She was responsible, in a way, for Gordy's not wanting to have me with him in Nepal!"

I looked surprised, and was. "You know Lindsey Ash Pearson?"

"Yes. She is a widow, of course," she said with a quick little catch in her voice. "Your—Neil. But. She sort of moved in our lives in London in the past five years. I was young, I know, but I resented her influence over Gordy. She came to see my godmother, oh, about a year and a half ago, I think, and I heard her boasting about how she would get Gordy as her next husband. I think it was she who must have warned Gordy that I was going to meet with David Markus. For he never ever before cared about who or whom I should meet or not. Yes. I am certain it must have been she!"

This news sobered me deeply. It lay heavy upon my heart.

The days began to pass from winter into spring with the melting snows. On the first day of March, Bianca's little son was born. And as if that were not enough for Soni and me, with the help of Nazar and Jaseen, Chanda went through her own difficult labor. Her little daughter lived only five hours. Naturally all of us mourned Chanda's loss. During the following weeks, Jaseen brought the first disturbing news from the village. The rumors were out that the much feared Kirghiz chief, Khan Shayet, was looking for the white women.

I questioned Bianca. Yes. She knew what Khan Shayet was after. "Tawny, David gave me a very valuable and priceless object of Chinese jade. I have it in my possession now. It's in a long leather pouch I keep in my skirts. There are a few ivory pieces, but the Chinese jade is priceless, he said. He had the matching one with him. I can't think what he must have done with it, if Khan Shayet didn't take them off him—"

"He gave it to me," I said, and between us, we brought out the treasures and stared in awe at the pieces. Both jade objects were beautiful pagodas. "He said they were worth a king's ransom," Bianca said.

When I said nothing, Bianca said, "My grandfather, old Lord Howard, had somehow acquired an extraordinary collection of valuable carved ivory, but there were two small pagodas of jade, just like these. They are still in the family, but I believed David hoped to sell these to make a profit, to prove to Gordon that he would not be penniless when I presented my husband to him."

"Did you know where the pagodas came from?"

"Oh, no. I never bothered. They were such pretty objects. I believe Gordon must know about them."

She wasn't well yet from giving birth to little Mark. She lay in bed with a fever and her leg had swelled badly. Chanda, whose baby hadn't lived, was strong again, a mystery of life, and her milk was making baby Mark a round cherub of health. Bianca played with him on her bed for hours, and then she would tire and fall back exhausted. I knew I should be glad for the time when we could take her out into the sunlight.

It was no surprise to me when one day, after she'd been brooding darkly, her face pale, that she said to me, "Tawny. We must talk, and you must decide that you will do this I ask of you.

No. Please don't think I am worrying for nothing. Listen. Please listen."

"I am listening, darling Bianca."

"I want you to take Mark and Chanda out of here. Take them to Gordon in Nepal. With no delay. For my son's sake, take him to Gordon. There's no time to wait. You can get through. Jaseen will guide you, and once you get to Baltit, the Mir will give you assistance. I am not well enough. I—must get well completely even to go outside of this house. But you are strong and I know you'll get to Srinagar, where Khan Shayet won't dare follow. Please, Tawny!"

It was natural that I should oppose her, and at first I would not even consider leaving Bianca behind, taking her child and its nurse over a mountain trail I knew already was dangerous. I kept hoping that Toby and Gavin would appear, but as those days wore on, and there was no news, and since I did know without a doubt that if they were alive, they would have made it through that pass when the snows began to melt. There was no such luck, and I knew I was grieving for them.

But the rumors were growing, and it was from Nazar that we heard the latest. "You should go. Great bad chief come, he take. Time, go now. Our Mir will protect you."

And I understood that Nazar was even thinking of the safety of his own family from this bad bandit. But what of Bianca? "I just can't leave you here, unprotected, Bianca!" I cried.

"That's just it," she answered. "Go to Baltit, tell the Mir what has happened, and perhaps he will send for me—send some of his warriors to protect this dear family. And Soni will look after me until I am completely well enough to travel. Oh, Tawny! Please, you must take my son from this danger. I will give you the—pouch too, and you'll wear it under your skirts. Take them to Gordon, and tell him everything."

There was nothing else I could do in the end. I looked at the kind faces around me; I knew their world was hard to exist in, but everything was precious and dear, for it was their lives. I looked at Bianca, pale, lying in her bed as she had done since the birth of Mark, and I looked at him, a fat healthy baby who would survive because his wet nurse was feeding him. She, too, would survive on the trail. And with Jaseen to guide us to Baltit, we could have very few problems, I thought.

We left just before sunrise the following day.

No one could have predicted as to what went wrong with our plans; on the outskirts of Baltit, Jaseen learned from a passing caravan that the Mir of Hunza was not in his castle, but away on a hunting party; he also learned that Khan Shayet was this very moment camped in Baltit. We dared not go through, or even around the city, for that Kirghiz chief would know it.

Jaseen had another plan. "We go to Leh, down through Baltistan into Ladakh. Rich merchant has caravan going today. We hide as pilgrims going to the temples in Leh."

I can never forget the mystery and uniqueness of those lamasieres, those gompas we stayed in each night, built high on hills overlooking a panorama of rivers and fields, with ranges of the Himalayas all around. The Tibetans in their flowing woolen coats and embroidered boots fascinated me.

We arrived in Leh eight weeks later. The merchant Gergen, who was going to Demchok and thence to Lhasa in Tibet on the morrow, bid us farewell, and Jaseen set about to look for his father.

After less than an hour away in the market, Jaseen returned to me and informed me that the caravans had come in, and that he'd seen the big Kirghiz.

We hid in Gergen's camel caravan going out of Leh; he didn't mind, but helped to disguise us well as pilgrims, and we traveled down the Indus to this border town, where we had to make another decision. Gergen had to stay awhile there, and we couldn't take the chance. It was he who gave us the best route into Nepal, and thus, with our surefooted yaks and pack ponies, we took our hurried but secret leave from our friend.

We were certain that Khan Shayet was following us; Jaseen kept insisting that we would find safety once we reached Nepal.

It was Chanda who woke me from my troubled sleep in the old gompa by shaking my shoulder gently. I opened my eyes to a room smoky with the curious gray light that comes before dawn. Then I realized I had somehow managed to sleep after all, and remembered that another long day was ahead of us.

It was customary to leave gifts of offering with the abbot, and I did not hesitate to leave a considerable amount this morning. They provided the yaks which we needed to get down the mountain to the Karnali River, and had given us some provisions.

One of the Tibetan monks went as our guide. It took us two full days, but as we left the gompa that morning, a deep blood-red sun rose in the eastern sky; a clean, almost pristine day was to be ours, instead of the snow I'd thought we'd surely have.

Two days later, we arrived in the village where the royal caravan of elephants was making ready to depart for the journey to Kathmandu. I was more than pleased to know that we would be accepted as part of the train, for there were members of the royal family of Nepal traversing the long corridor of the valley to the capital of this old kingdom of Nepal.

The following morning I stepped from the tent which Chanda and I were given on the first day out on that journey east. The sun was barely a crimson slice rising over the magnificent Annapurna range, but it was warm already. A man stood there, waiting for me.

The first thing I was aware of was his tallness; I am considered to be a fairly tall woman, but this man towered over me, dressed in neat khaki, the pants tucked into shining brown leather boots. The angry black eyes arrested me, but a moment later, I saw that they were not black at all, but a dark-hazel smoke color, stormy, and fringed with thick burnished stubby lashes, the color of his hair and closely cropped beard. He glared at me as if he wanted to strike me.

"Miss Butler, I believe?" His voice held no warmth, and even though the sun was warm in the semitropical morning, I felt the chill of that voice.

"Yes. I'm Miss Butler." I answered slowly, frowning up into those stormy eyes, and taking a step back from him as I let the flap of the tent fall into place.

"I heard that you had joined our party. At first, I couldn't believe it. You have a lot of explaining to do, Miss Butler." He was curt, rudely glowering down at me, his brows thickly meeting.

For no reason other than his odious manner, I lifted my chin defiantly and met that angry face. "Really, sir? What couldn't you believe? And just what have I to explain? I have not had the—misfortune to be introduced to you, so if you will excuse me—"

I turned to lift the flap to re-enter the tent, but he put out a hand on my arm to detain me.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Butler. Of course you don't know who I am. My name is Gordon Harding. I believe that you were given specific instructions in regard to my sister, Bianca Harding? I have just come from Srinagar, Kashmir, Miss Butler. I have no need to say how mystified I am by the complete silence of the past year. And now, to discover you are here—perhaps some light can be shed on the truth after all this time."

Had he struck me with his hands, I could not have been more unprepared. "Lord Harding. I am indeed—stunned to see you here, as well. You said you have been to Srinagar?" My eyes never left his. He nodded. "Was not your sister there?" But I somehow knew the dreaded answer.

"No, she was not there." His brows were lifted in speculation, I thought. "I would have thought you should have known that answer, Miss Butler."

It had been five months since I'd left Bianca in Nazar Shah's household; it was much longer than that since Toby and Gavin had rescued us from the Kirghiz chief, and when David Markus had lost his life. All my hopes, fervently believed in, had been that somehow my brother and Toby would have managed to get through any ordeal, but now I knew they were dead. Of Bianca, I had almost been certain that she would have made it down to Srinagar by the summer. I had nurtured that hope into actual belief, so therefore, my disappointment was a blow.

"Then, have you had no messages, Lord Harding?" My voice was thick with my fears.

"No, I have had no messages whatsoever, either from Tobias Roberts or from you, Miss Butler, not since he wrote to me to say that you had accepted my offer and that Bianca was there in Srinagar. And because of this silence, I went out there to learn just what was happening."

"Then you can't have known what—"

"Gordon? Gordon! Have you seen that little wretch of a maid? I simply must do something about—" The voice and the woman materialized together in the soft heat of the morning, and she stopped and blinked, just as I stared almost open-mouthed to face Lindsey Ash Pearson. Eight years had separated us and now, I suddenly recalled Bianca's version of how Lindsey Pearson had come into her brother's life, and her own dislike of this woman.

I allowed her to speak first. She glanced at Lord Gordon. "Darling! How can this be? Tawny—Tawny Butler is standing here before my very eyes, and it is not my imagination!"

She had been standing a little way off, but she came forward, gracefully sure of herself, and I made it impossible for her to greet me with a kiss on the cheek or even to clasp my hand by stepping back and placing both my hands down into the pockets in my skirt.

The
MARIGOLD
The orange and yellow Marigold,
valiant guardian
of the garden, is a worrier.
"I wait anxiously for
you," is its constant plaint.

"Hello, Lindsey," I said huskily, but indifferently.

"Tawny Butler! How on earth did you come to be here, of all places?"

There had been a time when I had believed that Lindsey Ash was the most elegant and sophisticated woman I'd ever known, and the most exquisitely groomed. On this particular morning, I wondered how she had managed to achieve a bandbox look, even here in the wilds of western Nepal. She wore the latest fashion in riding habits, made from a fine cloth of khaki, the skirt a little short over the polished leather boots. Her jacket fitted her slender form to perfection, and beneath the jacket, the shirt of tan cotton was tailored neatly. She was very attractive still, but I distrusted her.

"I am afraid it was not Her Royal Highness's invitation, but that of her steward, who managed to get me an elephant to Kathmandu, Lindsey." My voice was cool and distant.

"But how on earth *did* you get here? From where?" She gestured with her hand, bewilderment in her manner. She looked again at Lord Harding. "Darling? Did you know about all this? And you kept it from me?" She pouted with a coy look in her eyes, genuinely perplexed and gazed around at the colorful tented camp, now being dismantled for the move as servants and porters began taking down the tents to pack on the elephants.

In that brief speech, I thought I saw it all too clearly; it was the familiar tone of someone with shared intimacy. So that was the way it was, I told myself, hating myself for the little whisper of disappointment that seemed to touch my heart, even though I was sure I detected a small discomfort in Lord Harding's manner.

"Of course I didn't know Miss Butler was here," he said smoothly. "But now, I suggest that you get on with your packing. I must speak with Miss Butler, and it is important." It was a dismissal, and she didn't like it.

"Surely what dear Tawny has to say, Gordon, darling, should be my interest too. We are the very best of acquaintances, are we not, Tawny, dear? My maid is hired to do that packing."

"Nevertheless, I insist that I speak with Miss Butler alone."

Lindsey could do little else but to leave, yet she looked at me as she turned to go. "Tawny, dear. We must have a little chat too. Don't forget it." She smiled, and it rankled me more than I had wanted it to that she could get under my skin again so easily. But she smiled at Lord Harding. "Come to me when you've spoken to her darling. I'll be waiting." We both watched her walk away to disappear among the gaily striped tents that were somehow beginning to resemble giant mushrooms flattening out.

I turned to find him scrutinizing me, and under such a look, I felt a hot tide of embarrassment rush to my cheeks. He was comparing me with well-groomed Lindsey; my clean but simple homespun cotton skirt and shirtwaist had seen wear and tear, and were faded. The sleeves rolled up to my elbows, and my arms were tanned, as indeed my face and neck were not at all ladylike. I had discarded my long tunic and felt already the sweltering heat of the tropical valley after having known the cold clean mountain air!

It was only then that I realized I had not pinned my hair up in its usual knot; it hung down like a long hot cloak over my shoulders. I was uncomfortable to say the least. I heard Chanda moving around inside, and I saw Jaseen appear from around the tent to take my instructions, but I gave him a signal to wait.

Lord Harding caught that signal and turned to look. "Is that your servant? Pray do have him to see about your packing."

"This shouldn't take but a moment, Lord Harding," I said coldly, trying to be as remote from feeling as I could. "What I have to say to you—"

"Miss Butler," He interrupted just as coldly, "I will not waste time in arguing. You have much to say to me, and I insist that your servant take care of his duties while we take a walk and you can explain everything. We have, I should think, two hours at the most before Her Majesty and the Prime Minister are ready to move for the day."

We headed toward the riverbank, and only when we were out of earshot of anyone did he slow down, but he locked his hand firmly on my arm and said harshly, "Let us stroll along this path now while you talk. I warn you, Miss Butler. Leave nothing out. Where is Tobias Roberts? And where is my sister?"

Never had I been so indignant! "Lord Harding! Let go of my arm this instant, or I shan't say one word! Of all the impossible, odiously mannered men I have met, you, sir, have no comparison!"

He glowered darkly, his anger meeting mine, and for a second I thought he was going to shake me. To my astonishment, he suddenly took his hand from my arm and stood back.

I gritted my teeth to keep from slapping his face, and began rubbing my arm. The man was an impossible rogue!

"Now, if you please, Miss Butler." I had the distinct impression that he distrusted me.

The sun struck warmly on our faces in that moment, and in spite of my own distrust of him, as well as being indignant, I knew all my anger had fled. "There is no reason for you to be so stirred up, Lord Harding," I said quietly, knowing I had full composure. "I was on my way to you in Kathmandu."

This took him by surprise. But I said, "Are you sure that you did not receive the message Toby sent to you from Gilgit? Last September, I believe."

He stared at me oddly. "No. I received nothing. That is why I am deeply puzzled. Toby was usually explicit with his intentions."

◆

ON LEAVING HEAVEN

By E.B. de Vito

I read once of a Chinese goddess
who left Heaven and went down
to help the damned.
And everywhere she stepped, a lily grew,
and she eased pain
and brought comfort everywhere
till the King of the Underworld
complained angrily
that she was making a heaven of his Hell—

just like you, my darling,
just like you.

◆

"I do not know where Toby is, Lord Harding." I told him everything; the words tumbled out. He listened saying nothing, never interrupting through the whole thing.

There was no reason to leave anything out. "The winter passed some, and Bianca's little son was born—" I heard an intake of breath, sharp, and Lord Gordon swung me around to face him, for I had turned away, painfully recalling all those weeks of waiting, of knowing Bianca as a sweet adoring person. I didn't know until that moment that I had tears in my eyes, and they spilled over, wetting my cheeks, and I brushed them away with the back of my hand.

"My God!" he exclaimed, and I was vaguely aware of the shock in his voice. Even in the sunlight, I saw his face blanch under the deeply tanned skin. "What are you saying, Miss Butler? That Bianca had a child?"

"Yes, Bianca had a beautifully healthy little son. David Markus's son." I did not waver, and when he was silent to this, I went on. "That is why I am here, Lord Harding. I have brought Bianca's son to you."

"Miss Butler? Are you telling me my sister is dead? But you asked me earlier—"

I lifted my hands in a gesture to reassure him this was not so. "She was very ill after we arrived in the Hunzukut farmhouse, Lord Harding. But she recovered, and her health came back slowly. Having her baby simply weakened her again. But she could not make the journey. She begged me to take her son to you."

And then I told him of the Kirghiz chief, Khan Shayet, and all the reasons why I fled from him down into Leh, through Ladakh, and of the pursuit.

"And the child? You have him with you here in this camp?"

I nodded. "He is a very healthy strong child. Chanda looks after him well."

He was astonished. "You are an amazing young woman, Miss Butler. You have done a most incredible feat, journeying down through the most rugged part of the Himalayas. I—humbly—apologize for my—depraved conduct earlier. I beg your forgiveness. You have suffered much, it seems."

This took me by surprise. He reached out and took my hands in his, suddenly, warmly, and I saw a gentleness I was certain he kept veiled too often in those stormy gray eyes. He brought both my hands up to his lips and kissed them. "I feel most humbled by what you have done."

I felt a deep blush of embarrassment, but I was moved deeply, and I knew I wanted to weep, so I pulled my hands free and turned away.

We had escaped miraculously; little Mark was safe now. I could leave him in the care of Lord Gordon, and hand over to him those valuables which had caused so much fear and death already. And if Khan Shayet followed me here, then Lord Harding could deal with him. My duties were fulfilled.

I turned back to face Lord Harding, and found him watching me. "I would like to find Bianca, Lord Harding. I would like to know that she is safe. The Mir of Hunza, I know, would have offered her sanctuary, but had she been able to get there, then I'm certain there would have been a message for you in Srinagar."

He moved closer to me. "Miss Butler. Your concern for my sister is touching. I promise you this, that I shall leave no stone unturned until I do discover where she is. Will you trust me?"

There was a shout, and we both turned to see a servant running toward us, his red jacket brightly worn over the white baggy pants, and his brown bare feet leaping over the stony path with skill. Behind him stood the dignified form of some official with two young Gurkha soldiers with rifles on their backs.

The servant came closer, then stopped at a proper distance, and then bowed deeply. "His Excellency want to speak you. He say, please forgive, but come."

Everything closed up on Lord Gordon's face; he was immediately all protocol.

Lord Gordon turned to me. "Will you allow me to ask this one favor of you, Miss Butler? I dare say, but you will think it an odd one. However, I should appreciate it if you will say that the baby, Bianca's child, is yours. No harm will be done, and he will be safe enough. It is for security reasons. Bianca's estate is vast and there are some people in this very train who know this. Please. Do I make myself clear?"

He was looking at me, and I was suddenly apprehensive. "Are you saying that Mark is not safe, if he is known as—her—heir?" It came to me that Bianca could be dead in that moment, and it took my breath away with alarm, like a quiver through my heart.

"Precisely, Miss Butler. I fear that will be our greatest care now. Have I your consent then, to let it be known that the child is yours?"

"Of course!" I cried.

He smiled. "Please don't distress yourself, Miss Butler. I shall be close and in touch every hour during this journey. But just remember that you have come here to meet me, and nothing more."

I made my way back into the chaotic tent-packing to find that ours had not yet been taken down. I rushed inside to see Chanda munching on freshly baked chapati, which Jaseen had procured from the cooks while I was gone. He had brought in fresh fruit too, and when Chanda saw me, she gestured to the plate of food she had set aside for me. I saw that she had carefully packed our things, and that Mark was already fed and lying down on the clean blanket.

"Thank you, Chanda," I said, suddenly dispirited for no reason at all. "I must do my hair first." And indeed, I was annoyed that I had not done it up properly first thing this morning.

"I do hair for you," Chanda said at once. She bade me sit down beside the baby and brought the plate of food and the pot of tea she had ready for me. While I ate, she had her fingers in the masses of my hair, brushing it with skill, then smoothly wound it into a heavy knot on the nape of my neck.

I glanced at Mark, who gurgled pleasantly beside me, holding in his tight little fingers the little seed rattle Jaseen had made for him. I tickled his toes and he laughed the sweet laugh of a contented healthy baby. I picked him up suddenly and placed him in my lap.

◆

There was never any yet that wholly
could escape love, and
never shall there be any, never so long as
beauty shall be,
never so long as eyes can see.

Longus
Daphnis and Chloe

◆

He smelled scrubbed clean with soap and powder, and I looked down into his cherubic face.

He was beautiful, and I suddenly wished that he were mine. But even as that thought came, a great sadness wrung my heart, for I remembered that hour Bianca had parted from her son. I knew I would do anything to get him back into his mother's arms. For I would not believe that Bianca was dead. She had trusted me with her son's life to get him to the safety of her brother, and this I had done. But I had to hold on to my hope that she was still alive. Who could possibly be a threat to this beautiful child in this caravan? Who could know of Bianca? Of David Markus? Or indeed, for that matter, who could know of my brother, Gavin Butler?

I shivered suddenly, in spite of the heat inside the tent, and I knew all over again the dreaded fear of the threat with which Khan Shayet had overshadowed my whole spring and summer.

All at once, I wanted to be free of the burden of having in my possession the valuable treasures for which that Kirghiz chief had murdered David Markus, and possibly my brother and Toby. I felt that by not having it in my possession, it could be a safety measure for Mark.

Even as I was thinking these thoughts, and had made up my mind to hand them over to Lord Gordon at the first opportunity, I heard him speaking to Jaseen outside the tent. I was about to place Mark down, when the flap opened and Lord Gordon spoke. "May I come in, Miss Butler?"

He did not wait for my answer, but entered, and stood there looking down at me with Mark on my lap. Without a word, he strode over to me, sat down suddenly and lifted the child into his arms.

I'm sure I shall never know just what he truly felt in that moment, but I did see the unexpected surprise and pleasure in his expression as Mark laughed, the baby's hand grasping hold of the neat, clipped beard of his uncle.

Our eyes met as he was holding Mark, and something happened inside me, as if a sleeping chord had been struck.

Whatever might have been said was not spoken then, for there was a commotion at the doorway, and the flap lifted and Lindsey stepped inside. Her wide, candid brown eyes went from Lord Gordon to me, and I guessed then that she had summed everything up. "What a touching scene! Tawny!" She moved across the space to where we sat, and in that moment Lord Gordon handed Mark back to me and stood up. I had the impression that he had been caught unawares, and seemed none too happy about it.

But Lindsey said, "But,Tawny! A—baby? I had no idea . . ."

Lord Gordon said, "Yes, Lindsey. He is quite a handsome little boy. I commended Miss Butler—Tawny—on producing such a regular healthy child." His voice was deep with huskiness.

"But this is most surprising, Gordon darling! May I see him?" She stepped closer and would have taken him, but I stood up and gave him to Chanda, then turned to face Lindsey.

"I fear we are next. I hear the porters clamoring outside to take this tent down. Thank you, Lord Gordon, for looking after—my welfare."

"Oh, not at all, Miss Tawny. Come along, Lindsey. I'm sure she has many things to attend to." He made to go, but Lindsey looked at me.

"But, Tawny. Who is the father of your child? I had no idea—Oh there! It must have been that Tobias Roberts. Come now. Confess the truth."

"How did you guess, my dear Lindsey? Tobias and Miss Tawny were secretly married, so none of this was yet to be known. What I find most unusual is how you could have known. But let us leave Miss Tawny now." He took hold of her arm and ushered her through the door, and I heard her laughter echoing back to me.

Chanda and I rode with Mark atop one of the huge elephants in an elaborately canopied square box, which was draped in yellow muslin to keep out the sun. In front of the box sat the uniformed, turbaned driver, guiding the elephant with all its bright livery in the royal colors, which every single one of the train of fifty great gray animals wore.

I had mixed emotions throughout that day. Reason told me that Lindsey and Lord Gordon were more than just friends; hadn't Bianca informed me that Lindsey had plans to marry her brother?

But what did puzzle me more than anything was Lord Gordon's wish to keep Mark's identity a secret even from Lindsey. He had, with deliberateness, fabricated a marriage between Toby and me, with Mark as our child. So he did not trust even her with the truth.

We left the Karnali River and followed a smaller stream, and it was quite late before the caravan stopped again for the night. The pale sunset was left undisturbed to soak everything in its yellow light as the porters made ready the tents. Chanda carried water for our use, and while I scrubbed my skin and then pulled out my only decent gown of pale-lemon muslin, she fed Mark and then put him down to sleep.

I dressed with care, and Chanda brushed my hair and arranged it with skill into the smooth knot, and surprised me by tucking a cluster of pale-tangerine hibiscus around it. I added a few drops of lavender water to my temples to cool my skin, and then I was ready.

It was not yet dark, but in the growing dusk I heard the soft deep gongs of the ancient temple on the far bank of the river, calling the monks to prayer. Through the open flap of the tent, I saw the soft-pink tangerine moon rise full, climbing in the thickening velvet of night. I saw couples leave their tents and stroll hand in hand toward the waiting tents of the royal party, and I felt a twist of pain and some strange emotion around my heart that I did not want to admit even to myself.

My heart fluttered giddily, however, when I heard a footstep near the tent, heard Jaseen's low voice, and I turned to the doorway. But it was not Lord Gordon who crossed the threshold into the tent without announcement. It was Lindsey. She was attractively gowned in white silk, with a flamboyant dash of scarlet around her waist, and in the fading light of the tent she seemed almost to glow.

"Tawny, I just had to come. We must have a little talk." She glanced suspiciously toward Chanda. "Have your maid leave. They have ears like elephants, and never forget what they hear, and always gossip."

"What you have to say to me, Lindsey, can be said here and now, with my maid in attendance."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, very well. Just as you please." She looked at Chanda, who had somehow ignored her and gone about putting things away, then settling down near the sleeping Mark. She would make known her reason for wanting to talk with me. "What happened, Tawny?" Lindsay asked, frowning slightly. "I mean, to Bianca? Where is Gordon's fiery wild sister? I know that you must have been with her, you and Tobias Roberts. It was your lack of correspondence with Gordon that rankled him. He nearly went mad in the worry over that wayward child, and it was all I could do to keep him from going out to Kashmir before July! Your obvious power over Tobias, Gordon's right-hand man, left a blow where it hurts most."

When I didn't answer her outright, for I found this questioning quite absurd on her part, she showed a faint annoyance. I could see she was trying hard to win my confidence. She turned a full smile on me.

"Tawny, dear. Let's be friends. What's past, is over. I know you don't want to trust me again, but really, we can benefit much by joining forces, especially so now that you and Tobias are married. You see, Gordon and I—well. We are getting married very soon ourselves. It would be a load off my mind and my heart if you would find it in your heart to forget about the past."

I wanted to laugh, but even as I felt that scorn, I knew another feeling of despair, but I would not let her see that.

"Bianca is dead, isn't she? She ran away with that soldier of fortune, David Markus, didn't she? And she lost her life somewhere, possibly with him. Oh, I know all this. Gordon and I have been prepared for this truth, and now you have already told him. You must see that I should know about it too. Poor dear Gordon. He—loved that little naughty vixen, naturally. But she was a headache for him. She is—dead, isn't she, Tawny? You must tell me."

A deadly silence hung thick between us. She lifted her chin with that old arrogance I remembered all too well, and even in the hot thick air of the tent, I could see just how much she had aged. But I had grown too, and I faced her with a fierce pride, which unnerved her for the moment.

"I see," she said after that full moment of speculative silence. "So you have not forgiven, nor have you forgotten." She hesitated a brief second, a strange little smile curved on her mouth, and regarded me as if she were a cat toying with a mouse. "You are right, Tawny, dear. Remember it. I do get what I want." And she left me as though she had won a victory.

I kept asking myself, during the next minutes before I heard Lord Gordon speaking to Jaseen, why had she been insistent in wanting to know about Bianca? I distrusted her, it was true, because she had used me so when I was younger.

I went over to look down on Bianca's little son; he was sleeping, and Chanda sat quietly near him, her hands busy folding the nappies into neat squares. She had been watching me throughout the whole ordeal with Lindsey. Now, her gold round earrings tinkled as she moved her head slightly, looking up at me, and said, "Go. I look after Mark. He with me." She put a hand to her breasts, and suddenly I knew I should have no fears for his safety with Chanda.

I smiled at her. "Yes. And I trust you, Chanda. Keep your eye on him. We can't let his mother down now, can we?" And I leaned over and touched the baby's cheek with my fingertips.

"He outside now. You go?" Her eyes flashed in the semi-darkness.

"Yes. I go. Take care, Chanda." And

I went through the doorway, bracing myself to face this man and Lindsey. For surely, I thought, she would not give him one extra minute to be in my company.

Thus I was surprised when I stepped into the soft warm night to see him standing there without Lindsey, and waiting for me, talking in low tones to Jaseen.

He smiled at me, taking a step nearer. "I felt I should escort you to Her Royal Highness's shindig, Miss Tawny. I see it as my duty to present you."

"And . . . Lady Lindsey? She is not with you?" I heard the sarcasm, but I was determined that he should not know my feelings. It seemed that I had to play a new role, yet it did have its drawbacks.

He laughed. "She has already found her way to the tables. I understand that you were both acquaintances at sometime in your past lives," he said, as we fell into step and began threading our way through the pitched tents.

How much did he know of that? I wondered, and found myself biting my underlip. "She has told you then?"

"Not much. But, let us not dwell on it, Miss Tawny." He laughed, "And you can be guaranteed of the secrecy of your *marriage* to Tobias taking the caravan by storm. It all works out like clockwork. You . . . didn't mind, didn't you? I mean about my telling Lady Lindsey this?"

"Just as long as I know it is for Mark's concern, no. I didn't mind at all." And I remembered dear Toby and thought of what might have been had he not disappeared. I believed that he would have wanted it to be so. And now? What was my heart telling me? The man's warm fingers on my arm made my blood tingle, his nearness intoxicating, like the warm scented night around us. The stars lit up the velvet sky,and the moon was a glowing globe hung there for pleasure.

"Then we understand each other in this. I shall also introduce you to the other English members of this party tonight. Lady Jennifer Lawrence, wife of Sir Henry, the resident in Kathmandu, is traveling with their daughter, who arrived in India two months ago. They came up from Delhi with Lady Lindsey. The young woman has suffered from the heat of the plains, and she seems a bit under. The gentleman who will be joining the English party is a young employee of the East India Company, Sir Ralph Hodgson, who resides at the residency in Kathmandu, a sort of right-hand man for Sir Henry. But you shall meet them. The three ladies share a tent, which I'm told is beginning to be a trifle crowded."

I believed he was amused as he spoke, and indeed, I wondered just why he bothered to inform me that Lindsey was sharing her tent with the Lawrence family. Yet for an instant I knew a sudden little thrill of unexpected joy leap somewhere inside my heart. He was looking down into my eyes, and it seemed eternity, that look; I was deeply aroused, and I knew it, but I wanted to deny it.

We arrived at the great canopied open tent, where a dais had been improvised to resemble a throne, which faced a fairly large audience room, around which low tables had been arranged, with bright-colored cushions on which the guests sat in leisure in the Eastern fashion.

Great glowing paper lanterns hung like silk glowworms from the center and around the sides of the canopy. Carpets covered the ground, and flowers scented the air. It was magnificent, for the Queen and her retinue sat upon the dais, decked out in full regalia. We were among the last guests to arrive, and a servant led us to our cushioned places near the dais.

Lord Gordon introduced me to Lady Jennifer Lawrence. "I feel I already know you, Miss Tawny. May I call you Tawny?"

"Please do, Lady Jennifer," I said, smiling into a pair of refreshing periwinkle-blue eyes.

"I knew your brother, Gavin Butler—only slightly, mind you, but that was because he was seen so very little. However, Lady Lindsey has not spoken of anything else since she discovered that you were on the caravan with us. Tell me, my dear, have you been presented to Her Majesty as yet?" She lifted her fair eyebrows, smiling at me all too knowingly.

"No, I have not yet—" I stopped, for Lord Gordon touched my arm, and said to her, "It had been suggested that I present Miss Tawny to the Rani, Lady Jennifer. The Prime Minister would have it no other way."

"Oh. But this is a most unusual, but delightful, change from the usual affair, is it not, Lord Gordon?" She laughed softly, meaningfully, at him; then, as he agreed, she touched my arm with her hand. "Now, you must be friends with my daughter Jane." And the young woman on her right was remarkably like her attractive mother, but so very young and her face a blushing pink.

It was during the course of the meal, sumptuous by all Eastern standards, that Lady Jennifer revealed all the scandal of the royal court. Lord Gordon affirmed it, even as she spoke in low tones, while the musicians played on their long-necked sitars and drums, and the servants brought course after course of food to place before us.

The Rani, one of the most exquisitely shaped women I'd ever seen, sat in a glittering splendor of rich brocades and silk in the center of the dais. She wore a gold satin short-sleeved mandarin gown beneath the sheer, paler-gold silk sari, adapted from the Indian fashion; it was a mixture of Chinese and Indian, I noticed, and this tiny golden-skinned beauty could not have worn it to more effect; her long thick black hair was parted in the center and pulled back tightly into a heavy knot in back, and the Eastern crown gold set with huge emeralds.

Beside her, on the left, sat the young Prime Minister, Jung Bahadur Rana, and as Lady Jennifer pointed out, "Oh, my dear, but he was responsible for the assassination of Mataber Singh, the Prime Minister who was close to the King. Since his death, the Rani has had full control of the country, for she and the King are virtual enemies. She has her lover here with her, see, there on the right? He is Guggun Singh, a member of a very noble family of Nepal. But she is also being 'wooed,' as we call it at the residency, by none other than Jung Bahadur, with the help of the British."

"When—when was the last Prime Minister assassinated?" I whispered, for I seemed to recall the rumor that it had been the plot of the Queen to rid the King of his trusted Minister.

"A year ago last May, and it was quite

hideous," Lady Jennifer said. "It was a time when we all held our breaths, I can tell you."

I saw that Lord Gordon was frowning deeply, and I felt him stiffen beside me. "I would caution you, Lady Jennifer. We are not . . . shall we say, alone. And I must say, your daughter is looking so much healthier tonight. Perhaps this climate has improved her condition?"

"Oh, I am happy to say that is true, Lord Gordon. How very kind of you to take notice." She did not seem in the slightest offended that she had been called down for her outspoken thoughts on the vital government situation.

When the dinner was over and the servants had removed all the dishes, tea was brought, and the dancers came out and began to perform for us. Lovely Indian girls with bare skin under the sheer silk began a sensuous weaving of their bodies to the strange twang of sitar and drums, suggestive to the imagination, and so beautifully graceful that I could not take my eyes from them.

After these dancers left, another young woman came out, and she was a Nepalese, clothed more fully, but with no less charm and grace with her small exquisite form and face. She was a true performer, and the dance she performed in front of the Rani and her family seemed to convey all the obedience and submission she could give to her empress.

After the feast I caught a glimpse of Lord Gordon and Lindsey slipping away in the moonlight, and I felt a tight squeeze of pain around my heart, knowing that my own feelings toward Lord Gordon had undergone a complete change. I was annoyed by this admission.

It was when I was already undressing for the night that I remembered I had not turned over the valuable collections to Lord Gordon, and I felt a tremble of anxiety. He had not been too anxious to inquire after them, nor had I given him what papers David Markus had requested me to do. Thus, I was restless, and slept very little that night.

During the following ten days and nights of our travel eastward, this caravan routine was virtually the same pattern as that first day and evening had been. The mad chaotic rush to pack the tents and boxes on the elephants every morning; the travel until midday for short lunch breaks and a siesta time, because the sun was strong; then a full afternoon of travel with the sun at our backs, and making camp at sunset. Then the utter confusion all over again amid the porters and servants pitching the tents and lighting the fires for the cooking.

If I had entertained any thoughts of Lord Gordon seeking out my company during those strange lovely evenings when the purple drifted down over the wild lush valley we traveled through, I was sadly mistaken, for he did not do so. He and Lindsey were together mostly during those romantic nights, for I saw them walking away side by side, deep in conversation after the dinner hour was over.

For the most part, I found myself alone and into my thoughts, deeply puzzled by Lindsey's involvement with Lord Gordon, and her obvious interest in Bianca's fate. On several occasions, I had overheard her voice this tragic fate to Lady Jennifer, though not in Lord Gordon's presence. She spoke as if she knew for certain that Bianca was dead.

◆

My heart, I fain would ask thee
What then is Love? say on.
"Two souls with one thought only,
Two hearts that beat as one."

Munch Bellinghausen
Son of the Desert

◆

So it was that a week later we arrived in the incredible Pokhara Valley, with spectacular range of Annapurna rising to the north, and the sharp-crested Machha Puchhare—the fishtailed mountain whose summit was split by a crevice into two curved forms which we could see clearly as we approached this magnificent scene. The morning after our arrival, the sun rose clear in the sky, and the great mountains reared their crests in the bright morning glow. It was an unforgettable sight; we could see the massive giants of the Himalayas rise, those sheer, snowy peaks of the Annapurna range shine like polished silver. That same evening, they were aflame in the glow of the setting sun, their crests hidden behind great plumes of vermilion clouds. As soon as the tents were being pitched, I snatched Mark up and raced out to the high meadow where rape blossoms stood as a bold yellow shield beneath the great giants.

"Miss Tawny!" I glanced up as I turned my head to see Lord Gordon standing over us. I had not heard him approach, but I knew a sudden lifting in my heart.

"May I join you? I must confess that I followed you here, for I wanted to look at the baby Mark." He didn't wait for my invitation, but sat down cross-legged, and lifted Mark on his lap.

"He looks so healthy," he commented suddenly. "A very sturdy little boy, wouldn't you say so, Miss Tawny?"

"No doubt about it, Lord Gordon," I laughed. "Mark is a perfect specimen of heath. Chanda looks after him well."

"And you look after him very well indeed, too, I've noticed. I want to . . . thank you for this. It helps to know that someone like yourself has taken an interest in his well-being."

I felt a glow of pride wash over me, staining my cheeks, and I was grateful for the late sun's redness, for it helped to hide my feelings. Mark was laughing and kicking his fat bare feet as his uncle lifted him in the air.

We were silent for a while, listening to the muted distant sounds of camp life, and the warblers that sang in the high still meadow.

Then I said, "I haven't given you the letters and documents which David Markus wanted me to give to you, Lord Gordon. And those which Bianca also entreated me to hand over to you. Perhaps you should have them now."

"Do you have them with you?" He had placed Mark down in the crook of his arm. "They could well be safer in your possession until we get to Kathmandu, Miss Tawny." He glanced around us in the high golden meadow even as I did, for I suddenly had the uncanny sense of being watched. I believe he must have felt that too, although he didn't voice it, and neither did I.

"Perhaps you ought to take a look," I insisted, and I stood up, turned my back to him, lifted my skirt and untied the strings around my waist which held the pouches in safe pockets in the lining of my petticoat, and which I wore at all times. I removed them and turned back to him.

As I sat down, I gave him the pouches and took Mark, and placed him in my lap, then said, "You must have a look. I don't want to be the only one of us responsible for all of this." I gestured to the black leather pouch which had David Markus's initials on it. Then I turned and looked out into the sunset, not speaking while he opened and read all the letters and documents which David had wanted him to have.

We were quiet, and I felt his nearness with such an excruciating throb of joy and pain. I knew in my heart that I now loved Lord Gordon Harding and that he would never return that love for he belonged to Lindsey, and would never be free for me. I buried my face into the baby's sweet person, all too aware that I had already become too attached to Mark, and I ached in that sadness of knowing.

"You are very sad for some reason," Lord Gordon's voice broke in on my thoughts. "And it's my guess that you are thinking of Bianca and Mark." He sighed heavily, and I turned, glad of the sudden shadow, but stirred because he had seen what I could be feeling. "Don't be," he said suddenly. "Don't be sad. If . . . it is true that she may not come back, then we shall face Mark's future, and what is best for him. I must say, his father was . . . quite a man. Thank you, Tawny. For caring and for bringing to me these letters." He gestured toward the papers. "It clears everything." He stuffed them back into the pouches.

I was conscious of the fact that he'd spoken my name with something like a caress and it sent little shivers of delight through my blood, causing a strange pulsating inside me.

"I will keep the letters to read over, but I do think it would be to our advantage if you used your safe . . . hiding place for these valuables. Just for a few days longer, until we reach Kathmandu. Do you mind very much, Tawny?"

I looked up and met his eyes; I saw a trace of amusement on his sensuous mouth, and there was laughter in the way he was looking at me. I reddened, but I said I didn't mind, and took the pouches again. "I'm not so sure I like the idea of being responsible for these valuables, Lord Gordon. I can't think that I've seen the last of Khan Shayet, not after his having pursued me so far. He is unscrupulous, and he has murdered too many men already—"

"Please, Tawny," he broke in and I sat down facing him. "You must not be afraid of Khan Shayet, even if we haven't seen the last of him. I promise you this. You and Mark are safe with me. I have my reasons for believing that those valuables are safer with you in this caravan, and it's for only a few more days. You must trust me."

He reached out his hand and took my own, and in that one touch, I knew a new burst of joy that sounded like an explosion inside me somewhere. "You see, I just believe that things will have a way of sorting themselves out for the best. I want you to accept this too, Tawny." He kept my hand in his, and in doing so, pulled me a little closer, and our faces were very close. His lips brushed mine ever so gently so that it was like a breath, rather than a kiss.

"Gordon! Gordon?" We shot apart as Lindsey ran across the now shadowed meadows toward us. Her eyes moved over the blanket we sat on, from Gordon to myself and to the baby which he still held.

She moved over to where Gordon sat and kneeled down. "Oh, darling! What a precious charming little boy! May I hold him?" She reached for him, and my heart trembled with anxiety. But Mark began to cry, and it seemed like a shock to her. Lord Gordon stood up, holding him next to his shoulder and patting his back. He hushed immediately.

I stood up. "It's time for his feeding. Perhaps I should be getting back," I said, picking up the blanket and folding it.

"It's time we all should be back," Lord Gordon said, and I made a move to take Mark, but he said, "Allow me to carry him, won't you, Tawny? It's the least I can do for . . . Toby's son." And he winked at me full, while Lindsey came up to his side, falling into stride easily enough, as we started back.

"Cheer up, Tawny," Lord Gordon turned to me. I had been walking glum and silent. "When we get to Kathmandu, Toby could surprise us both and be there waiting." He touched my shoulder gently with his hand, putting it reassuringly. I could feel his touch burning my skin under the faded-yellow cotton shirt; it was like a flame scorching. I met his eyes, and I thought he was amused.

"Then Toby will discover for himself just how much Mark has grown," Lindsey gushed, "if, as you believe, Gordon, dear, he is there waiting to surprise us. How fortunate if your little sister, Lady Bianca, could be there too! Oh, Gordon! I know you are still upset over her disappearance, for that is what it amounts to, now, isn't it?"

I could have cried. Lord Gordon looked down at Lindsey and smiled. "And Bianca could possibly show up there herself, my dear Lindsey. She has a certain streak about her that somehow always wins. If she disappeared, it was for a reason. Thank God for that." He laughed, turning away, and we began walking toward the tents.

I was uneasy; a sense of foreboding would not set my mind and heart free. It puzzled me greatly that Lord Gordon did not trust Lindsey with the truth. Especially since I knew they were planning to get married. So why? And why did he trust me? He walked between us, with Lindsey holding onto his arm, and we continued back to camp.

After I had given Mark his bath, a nightly ritual I'd begun to take on with great pleasure, I gave him to Chanda's care to feed him and put him to sleep. Then I had a bath, and began to ready for dinner. I wished desperately for a pretty, decent gown to change into, but I had to be content with the one I had worn every evening for the past week, and knew I should count myself fortunate for this one.

I wanted to hold off my thoughts for a while, simply because I did not want to destroy that tender but sweet and brief moment in the meadow. I knew that I could never allow my heart to entertain such a presumptuous dream that he had felt what I knew my heart had known; for him, he could be playing a game with me, just as he was playing one with Lindsey. She was the one he would marry; she was the one he would share his life with, and in the end, if Bianca did not survive, it would be Lord Gordon and Lindsey who should take Mark into their keeping.

I was in love with Gordon Harding, and I knew it. It was a stark and naked truth.

Lindsey Ash Pearson. Why did it

have to be her, all over again? I wanted to weep.

It was much later than usual when we made camp the following day, and the Rani's steward came around to inform us that no special dinner would be made this night, as it was imperative to reach Kathmandu on the following night. He warned us that we should be ready to pack and leave before dawn. It threw the whole camp into its worst chaos; there was no organization. It was already dark, and everyone had to shift for himself for the evening meal, around a large campfire.

Thus I was holding Mark in my lap while Chanda went to fetch her own food and Jaseen's, when Lord Gordon put his head through the door flap and said, "Is it convenient for me to come in?" He was smiling, looking rather tanned in the flare of the lantern light. My heart did a strange little turnover, for I was glad that he was here.

He was so tall that he almost had to stoop even standing, so he sat down on a cushion across from me, and he took Mark into his arms. "I'm growing quite fond of this little fellow. Do you think he recognizes me?" He was showing his pleasure in the baby, and I had to laugh.

"Oh, I'm sure of it. The first words he will babble out will be 'Unkie Gordy' or something like that!"

We sat there for some long minutes, taking pleasure in this beautiful child of Bianca's, and I was aware of the pleasure I had,too, in Lord Gordon's company.

"There is much about you that I'd like to know," he said softly. "You are the most incredible woman I've ever met. Gavin told me something about you, but I could not have imagined you like this." His eyes were suddenly all over my face, warm and reading me. The shaft of light so yellow from the lantern fell across his face, and he was close to me. The baby had fallen asleep in the crook of his arm, and although he hadn't moved, the space between us seemed intimate.

If this very nearness aroused such a tumult of desire within me each time I was close to him, I knew this was a mistake, because I knew that Lindsey was in the picture. My heart was beating so fast that I felt giddy, in spite of that fact.

Yet no matter what I tried, I could not pry my eyes from his; they were devouring me as if he were seeing me for the first time. He did not touch me as he had yesterday in that high meadow among the rape blossoms. But this was more than a touch; it said everything and did everything I wanted to know and feel.

We heard the gentle coughs outside the tent, and the moment was gone. Chanda came in softly, after speaking to Jaseen, and Lord Gordon glanced smilingly at her. She understood, and took Mark and placed him down on the pallet where she slept with him. Lord Gordon stood up then and turned to me as I, too, stood up.

"It will be an early start, and the day will be very long tomorrow. But when we do reach the capital, I will take you to the residency. I will leave you now. Try to get as much sleep as you can. Good night, Tawny."

◆

THE SECRET

by Helen Bjorklund

No proper tipping
of the hat
no answering nod
from her
but suddenly
the marketplace
was emptied
but for two
and the fleeting smile
that passed across
the busy thoroughfare
they carried with them
down the street.
What secret
did they share
so lovely that
it trailed behind
like perfume
on the air?

◆

And he was gone, out into the night.

Lying restlessly on my pallet that night, I tried to banish the memory of that moment when everything had become clear and answered. Within my heart I had faced up to the truth that I loved him. Every instinct of survival told me that I ought to bow out before I was caught in that web all lovers found themselves enmeshed in, and every fiber of my being rebelled to fight for what could be mine. Lord Gordon and Lindsey were not yet married, and I was no mere nineteen-year-old lovesick girl now for Lindsey to use and frighten. Perhaps now Lindsey and I were on a common battleground.

To me, Kathmandu was the very essence of an Oriental Shangri-La, mystic and forbidden to the outside world. Visitors had to be invited to enter into this kingdom, and with a strange feeling of awe, I knew I was one of the fortunate outsiders, and I had no little thrill of anticipation.

The streets were broad leading down into Durbar Square, where the palace was located, and from my perch in the box atop the great gray beast, I caught glimpses of the narrow, tortuous back streets, which were a fascinating jumble of old houses with elegantly carved figures on their wooden posts and windowsills. There were tiny shops beneath the two- and three-story houses, where the shopkeepers sat in beautifully kept wooden stalls, on small carpets, weighing and measuring their grains and spices, selling vegetables, fruits, milk, cheese, chickens and eggs, as well as firewood and bright-colored cloth. There were chang stalls too, where one could have that hot tea the Nepali loved so well, on those back streets and where throngs of people this later afternoon had come to stare in amazement at the elephants entering through the gates to the palace courtyard.

It was about an hour later that I found myself with Mark in my arms, riding in a rickshaw with Chanda beside me, following the other members of our small English party, leaving the palace, and headed toward the British residency.

The purple of early evening had set in, and racing along between the high rosy brick walls of the narrow streets the coolies ran through. I had glimpses of the flaming passion trees, of lush banana fronds and beautiful old houses set in well-kept gardens, like small palaces beyond locked gates.

Once inside the compound, however, it was like arriving in a different world —a paradise of flowers, fountains and quiet air of the English. I was amazed as the rickshaw boy ran up the curving drive and halted in front of a long two-story white house with a red tiled roof. Beyond in the grounds, I caught glimpses of small bungalows, and I guessed that the British citizens who served out here would most likely be keen on our arrival.

We went through a wide doorway into a cool hall that divided the wings of this rather large house, and we went through this hall to the back, which opened onto a gallery overlooking a lovely garden court, around which the three other wings of the house were built.

Lord Gordon's quarters were on the

lower floor, a very large suite of rooms that were spacious and as cool as that garden itself was, with wide windows covered with netting of deep green as a protection against the insects. There was a large lounge, with chintz-covered sofas and chairs, and deep Persian carpets over the wide floors made it quiet and comfortable and more like an English house than I could have imagined.

I glanced around the room, suddenly enjoying the luxurious sight before me, yet all I wanted to do was to sink into a bath of warm scented water and relax!

Lord Gordon had seen the expression on my face and he smiled. "I know you must be as weary of travel as I am, Tawny. So without further fuss, I'll take you to your rooms—you may have the one with the small dressing room, and the bath." He laughed.

I followed him down a corridor, and into the rooms. "One of the maids will be along to do for you. Jaseen can act as your houseboy, so as not to refute my houseboy's status," he smiled. "There are beds in the servants' quarters for him. Chanda can remain with you, naturally."

"This is more than I expected," I said in a low voice. "It's all so incredibly English." I had to laugh, glancing around the large bedroom.

"Yes. The British invariably will have their piece of England wherever they lodge! I trust you will be comfortable here."

"Oh, I shall, of course." I laughed again rather weakly, recalling the inconvenience I'd had for the past year! I turned to face him. He seemed hesitant to leave me.

His thoughtfulness overwhelmed me, and the warmth in his dark smoke-gray eyes was like a soft caress on my face. "Thank you. You are . . . generous." I could barely get the words out, and I knew I didn't want him to leave either. But the porters brought in my bags, and servants began carrying in great copper pails of steaming water.

So it was just as well that he went to the door and smiled back at me, then left.

It was some two hours later that I—shampooed, scrubbed, scented and relaxed as I'd not been for weeks—months even—sat before the wide screened window, buffing my broken nails, feeling elegant in a new silk gown Chanda had created for me.

I had hardly given thought to my brother, Gavin, for some time, and suddenly a great longing to see him overwhelmed me; a rush of tears came to my eyes, and I brushed them aside, willing myself not to cry now to redden my eyes. How brief that been that moment that we'd both been caught up in the drama of the rescue in Khan Shayet's camp that night! It was more like an unreality—some nightmare I might have gone through. But to have seen him for that moment, and to know he was alive, had been a joy I'd been unprepared for. Would I ever see my brother or Toby again?

A sudden shiver of apprehension brought goose pimples to my skin when I recalled what Gordon had said of Khan Shayet; he felt as I'd felt, that I hadn't seen the last of this big Kirghiz. Even now, I wore those valuables beneath this silk gown, in between the petticoats and tucked inside two side pockets, for safekeeping.

And then I had to laugh at my fears; what could Khan Shayet do now? I was secure with Mark, safe in his uncle's rooms, within the British compound, and Gurkha soldiers guarding the gates.

Love is something eternal—the aspect may change, but not the essence. There is the same difference in a person before and after he is in love as there is in an unlighted lamp and one that is burning. The lamp was there and it was a good lamp, but now it is shedding light too, and that is its real function.

Vincent Van Gogh

A vision of Bianca's face came to me; and I knew a grief that would take me a long time to get over as I remembered her all through those weeks and months in Nazar Shah's little home. Oh, that there would be word of her safety! I longed to know, and I stood up suddenly, and turned back to the room.

I was not prepared to see Lindsey standing there. I had to blink twice; I had not heard her enter; indeed, I had heard no sound at all. It caused me to tremble almost violently in that split second when our eyes met across the deep shadowy twilight of the room.

Never had I seen her look so attractive as she did now; the blue silk gown she wore had a gossamer sheen about it, and the way it folded across her high full breasts gave her a seductress look. Even her fine white skin had a luminous glow, and her hair was as glossy as sealskin.

"You started me, Lindsey! I had no idea—" I stopped, for I did not want her to see just how unnerving her presence had made me.

"Of course you didn't even suppose I'd find my way into Gordon's private rooms, Tawny dear! You seem to take no notice of anyone but yourself in these matters." She laughed huskily, so sure of herself that it brought a sharp pain to my throat.

"I don't know what you can be thinking of—"

"You know all right, Tawny. You know very well, yet you pretend with your so-called innocent mind that Gordon is available for only you! Well, you have a lot to learn. He is not free for you to . . . throw yourself at, as you did my husband in the past!"

I ached to throw back my anger into that smooth face, but I said nothing, meeting her eyes with an much calmness as I could will.

This silence of mine seemed to agitate her; her eyes left my face for a second and then she said, "I've been in to see Mark. He is sleeping beautifully. I am here because Gordon asked me to come over. He is . . . in my rooms, you see." She moved the tip of her tongue over her lips lightly, a secretive assured manner in her every movement.

I could have died then; of course. He had gained my trust, yet he had not spoken his heart; it had been only one-sided. He was in love with this woman, not me! But he had asked me to trust him. He had given me rooms in his quarters, but he had gone to . . . Lindsey!

I heard myself saying, "You have no right whatsoever to come in and look at Mark. What concern is he of yours, pray tell?" I matched her poise, calm and defiant.

"Don't I?" She lifted her eyebrows and inclined her head sidewise, that secretive smile almost dazzling. "That is what I came over for, you see, to look in on Mark. Gordon asked me to. You see, Tawny. I know the truth now. You couldn't hide it from me forever. You told a lie about Mark being yours, but I know he is not your child. He is Bianca's son, and you have no right to him."

"I have every right. What is so amazing is that you think you can come in like this and speak like this to me." I was angry, and I moved across the room, hurrying away from her, for the sight of this woman was insidious to me.

"You can be sure of one thing. Mark is not yours, not now, not ever. His mother is dead, and Gordon and I shall raise Mark as our own. Oh, Gordon knows now, about you. I mentioned your behavior toward Neil before we married. He was too upset to come back here, so he asked me to look in on Mark, and to tell you in so many words that you should not put in an appearance at Sir Henry's sherry party. I believe he wants not to see you, and be reminded of his own . . . folly in trusting your character."

It was wickedly said; for the second time in my life I felt I could murder, and it was directed at this one woman! What had she invented about my "character" to cause such a reaction?

"Get out!" I said, steeling every nerve within me to keep from striking her or raising my voice. "Get out of my sight!"

"I will go now. But just so that you know this, Tawny Butler, I will say it now. Gordon and I are to be married within a few days, and Mark will remain with us, with me, and I intend to raise him as I would my own son. Don't you forget it."

I turned my back on her and went to stand by the window, looking out at nothing. She laughed, a sort of bubbling kind of laugh, and I heard the door open and close behind her.

Only then did I begin to tremble with my anger. My first thought was for the safety of Mark. I wanted to take him away, out of the reach of this woman. But where could I run to now? I had faced the certain hazards of death at the hands of Khan Shayet to bring Mark to this safe place in his uncle's care and protection.

I found myself pacing the floor, restless, sick with fear and hatred for what Lindsey had created. It was Lindsey who had done this thing, I thought suddenly. It was she who had deliberately come in here, perhaps to—to *goad* me into a reaction that would place Mark's life in jeopardy!

With that thought, I stopped pacing. Of course. She had wanted me to take Mark and thus give reasons for my kidnapping him! It was just like her to be so diabolically clever.

I had to give Lindsey credit for one thing, she knew Mark was not my own son, that he was Bianca's. Lord Gordon must have confided in her. Well, I thought, indignantly, I had done my duty for Mark. I had brought him to his uncle, and my duty was finished, here and now. I made up my mind I would go to Lord Gordon, face that anger he apparently was directing at me, and I should tell him I was no longer responsible for his nephew. Then he could do whatever he liked.

The door opened before I could reach it, and Lord Gordon stood there. It was such a shock that for one split second I could find no words. He had changed from the khaki bush clothes to a most dignified suit of stiff white linen, the shirt beneath the jacket a cool pearl gray. In sharp contrast, his ruddy hair glistened from the obvious bath he'd had.

He looked at me with a secretive smile, and moved across the room to look closely at me. "If I didn't know better, Tawny"—his voice was low, somehow guarded—"I'd say you are a very distressed young woman, but a very beautiful one. What has happened? Is Mark—"

"He is sleeping peacefully," I said, a strange ache in my throat. "I'm waiting for Chanda but, I would like to talk with you, Lord Gordon." I tried to keep my voice impersonal, distant.

"Of course. I too want a talk with you. I'm sorry I took so long. I had Pemba bring over my clothes and I had a good wash in my office. I felt that I had all of Asia in my hair and clothes! Come. Let's make ourselves comfortable."

This caught me by surprise. "I am sorry that I chased you out of your quarters . . ."

"My dear Tawny. You did not chase me out. It was just more convenient to have my hot water brought there. I am ready now, presentable enough, I hope, to take a most beautifully gowned young woman to dine with me at the senior resident's supper party. You are a most enchanting creature in that lovely gown, Tawny."

This most delightful compliment took me unawares. Hadn't he sent Lindsey over to me to say I was not to put in an appearance at Sir Henry's party? I hardly knew where to begin. Yet I knew I could not be subjected to such torment as I would be suffering if I stayed here and watched the man I loved marry a woman like Lindsey Pearson!

"The gown was of Chanda's making and her gift to me," I said, pleased that he had taken notice.

My voice, when I spoke again, was tight and unlike my own. "Lord Gordon, I made a promise to your sister and to her husband that I should do what I could do in bringing their son to you. I tried hard to bring Bianca to you, but the circumstances, which you know by now, were out of my control. But I have done my duty, and I feel that I should now be relieved of . . . all obligations. I believe it is time now that I should make other arrangements, and then I should like to return to Kashmir as quickly as possible, before the snows come."

He seemed genuinely stunned. "Tawny. I—I believed you were concerned for Mark's welfare?"

'I am. Oh, but I am! I have brought him here to your keeping, and since you will be marrying very soon, I think that Mark will have all the security which I could not continue to give him." My face was hot, my hands cold.

He was silent, and the shadows gathered in the quiet room, but neither of us thought of lighting the lamp.

He stared at me, his eyes burning like coals over my face. "I see. I had no idea you felt so strongly. I beg you, my dear Tawny, to bear with me for just a while longer, until I can settle everything. Mark needs both of us right now. Can you not see your way to remain with us for an indefinite period?"

I shook my head, near to tears. "Lindsey would resent my being here, as well as you should know."

He frowned. His eyebrows went up. "Lindsey? Whatever has she to do with all of this?"

Of course I felt like a fool, but a surprised one. "She knows about Mark, but then, I suppose she was entitled to know—"

"Entitled? But however did she know? How could she know about Mark?"

"Why, you told her, didn't you? After all, she will be your wife in a few days—" I stopped, for never had I seen such a black angry look.

He jumped up. "Did she tell you this? When?" He grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet, facing him.

"She came . . . here, not more than—" I stopped, for his eyes bored into my own, and his fingers gripped my shoulders.

"Damn Lindsey! Do you think I care a rush for her?"

"You are engaged to her—"

"Not that I know of. But, how did she learn of Mark's parents?"

"Did you not tell her?"

"I did not. God in heaven! She was

the last person I wanted to know about Mark!"

"I don't understand. She has implied all along that you and she—"

"To hell with Lindsey and what she has implied! It's you I care about, my dearest Tawny! And we'll get this settled right now." What I read in his eyes that moment, nothing else in the whole world mattered. He was not in love with Lindsey, nor was he going to marry her!

His arms went around me suddenly, and his mouth came down on mine. It was sweet to respond to him with an abandon that matched his own, but only for an instant. I did not want to be swept off my feet for a second time; it was a lesson I had had to pay for and dearly so. I had suffered painfully and with Neil. I did not intend to go through it all again.

"Tawny, Tawny. Do you know what you do to me? I fell madly in love with you when I saw you on that first day! My God! I never dreamed that I could love a woman as I know I love you." He held me back from him, looking down into me, and I was so overcome by joy and surprise that I could not speak.

"You are beautiful, now, tonight. But never more beautiful than I saw you in that morning light for the first time, with your unbound hair the color of wild honey, and your eyes a strange shade darker! A woman proud and free, and I knew something happened to my heart then. I love you, Tawny."

No words had ever meant so much to me. It was madness, but it was sweet to listen to him. His mouth came down on mine again, and I was lost in this new and dreadfully wild sweetness that made my whole body tremble.

I stepped back in his arms. "What of . . . Lindsey?"

"And what about Lindsey? Who is she?" He was smiling down at me.

"You and she—"

"She means absolutely nothing to me."

"Then you are not promised to her?" I had to say it, for I simply had to know.

He shook his head. "Whatever was between us is over now, long since. Oh, yes, I know she had fanciful notions that we should be properly married, but that was totally on her part, her idea and never mine."

"She was your mistress."

"For a brief period. I was attracted to her when she first came out to Nepal, mainly because she was an Englishwoman and made herself available. She had taken a keen interest in Bianca's welfare too, and she was the one who prompted me to engage a companion for my wayward sister." His eyes were suddenly full of laughter. "Oh, my darling Tawny! I do love you. Please never believe that there was anything like this between Lindsey Pearson and myself!"

"You did not go to her this evening?"

"Certainly not. I haven't seen her since we arrived. But, damn Lindsey! What I want to know is. Do you love me, Tawny Butler, enough to marry me? Can I dare hope that you would love me?"

"Is this true?" I whispered. "Can this be true? I do love you, Gordon. And I love you enough to be your wife."

He took my face, cupped it in his hands and kissed my lips ever so softly. "Then you have made me the luckiest and the happiest man in all this kingdom, Tawny. I have many harsh ways, as you will learn. My faults are not few. But I can promise you that, from this second on into time eternal, my heart is yours. Whatever has been before is over and finished. Will you believe this, and trust me?"

I felt as though I were dreaming, and I didn't want to awaken ever and find that it was only a dream. Does one ever want to leave such joy and bliss to face a reality that could only be dull, after such a promise of true love?

"More than life itself," I cried softly, knowing my eyes were moist with joy.

"We shall discover everything together—a lovely voyage of discovery of each other. It will be a new beginning for both of us. Whatever faults or perfections which made our characters up until this hour, helped mold us for each other from this second onward. We shall be happy. Let us both count our blessings that we are ready for each other."

When he kissed me then, there was comfort and reassurance which I had not been prepared for, I gave myself up to the bliss of his arms and his kisses.

"I want to anounce our plans tonight, my darling Tawny! I am a man of action, and I do not propose to put off the most important thing in my life. I fear you will learn that I am a most impatient man at times." He was smiling indulgently at me. "Have you any objection to a very rushed wedding?"

"None whatsoever," I said lightly, ecstatically. "But you may forget that I am a *married woman* already, of your own making! How will the Lady Jennifer and Miss Jane, not to mention others, react to this sudden and fearfully improper announcement?" I laughed. "And I even have a baby son. And where is my dear Tobias Roberts, the missing husband?" I teased, but there was a touch of anxiety reflected in my voice, and he noticed it.

A deep chuckle escaped his throat. "I can promise you, I did not forget this situation. I have already underscored the usefulness of your married state to perfection. As far as Lady Jennifer is concerned, she is well known for her own modes of coping with any surprise situation! Do you care so very much, my dearest Tawny, about shedding the guise of being Mrs. Tobias Roberts on such short notice?" His eyes seemd to be all over my face, and I tingled with anticipation as his hands moved over my arms, warm, caressing.

It was a lovely evening when we stepped out into the exotic garden of the compound. We walked slowly, aware of each other and the magical mystery and wonder of our love.

As we passed a heavily scented rose enclosure, Gordon stopped and plucked a sweet-smelling yellow blossom, and gave it to me. "A rose of promise to you, my darling," he said softly kissing my cheek. It was like a signature of our declared love. The petals had not yet fully opened, and it was wet with dew folded inside the sweet perfumed heart.

I moved in a haze of happiness; beyond that haze, I knew there could be a rude reality. But here was my love beside me, looking down at me, and he took me into his arms and it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world for his mouth to find mine.

He lifted my face with both his hands, and his lips wandered lightly over my hair and my eyes and came back to my mouth, this tie with such sudden and fierce strength that it made me tremble. The last shred of memory of that old past with Neil was chased away by that kiss of promise. This was something enduring, lasting until the end of time itself.

So this is love, I thought. That emotion of the heart that lifts one beyond the heights of human experience! I loved and I was miraculously loved and by this man. I was prepared to risk everything for love such as this.

"We shall be so happy, my darling," he whispered. "Happier than either of us could ever have dreamed. It's my promise to you, and it begins right now." And I believed him.

We entered the spacious hall, which divided the house into two wings; through the opened doors to the left was the lilting sound of someone playing the piano, and laughter floated out. From the closed double doors to the right, a man came out.

"Oh, there you are, Gordon!" he said hurrying over to us. "I was beginning to wonder what happened to keep you. But now I can see, and clearly, by Jove!"

"Sir Henry. My apologies for being late. I do want you to meet Gavin's sister, Miss Tawny Butler." Gordon spoke with pride, and it made me quite heady with the wonder and joy of it all.

"Well. This is indeed an occasion—by gad, if it's not!" His mild blue eyes widened behind his small square spectacles: a very distinguished gentleman, I thought, mentally putting him beside his wife Lady Jennifer. "Miss Butler. I am indeed honored to meet you. What we have heard of you and your illustrious brother is enough to make anyone stand up and take notice!" He took my hand in his, welcoming me warmly.

"Sir Henry," I said politely, not quite believing all I was hearing.

"Sir Henry," Gordon said seriously, "Miss Tawny has just promised to become my wife, and has indeed made me the most fortunate happy man I know. You are the first to know, and I do not intend to keep it a secret or wait for more than three days before we take our vows." He smiled down at me, and I melted in that sweet heady warmth.

Feigning great surprise, Sir Henry beamed. "No! But, by gad, this is splendid, my dear fellow! Congratulations!" He shook Gordon's hand, and then kissed both my cheeks. "We shall have to do something about that in a very short time. But first. You both must hurry with me to my study. Before any one else sees you. Come along. If my wife spies you, I'll never get this chance again."

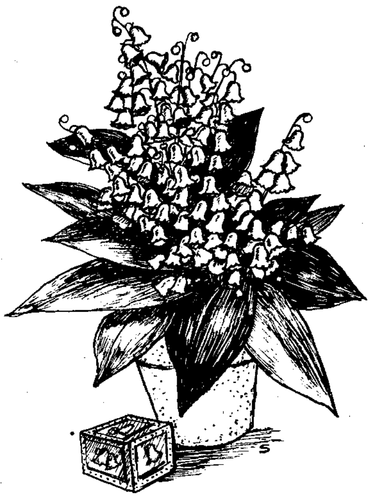
He turned to the butler. "Nadar. Bring a bottle of that champagne and glasses to my study. And mind you, don't let Lady Jennifer catch you!"

He opened the door to the study and I entered first. There were three people inside, and I know I simply stared in utter amazed confusion. Bianca, Toby and Gavin turned to face us, and in another second, all wild emotions of the heart tore loose, and never had such a reunion been so dramatic as this!

There were tears, laughter and amazed questions to be answered. Gordon, I finally learned, had known that they were safe, but he hadn't seen them until now. This was to be his gift to me, as well as himself, and I could hardly believe it.

Bianca and Gordon met as she ran into his arms, and I was caught up by Gavin, Toby, dear loyal Toby! "How! Where? When?" I cried out, speechless except for my joy. Everyone was talking at once.

It was all too fantastic as their story folded out piecemeal during the next hour. Bianca and I fell into each other's arms and we both wept while I told her about Mark and Chanda and Jaseen and of our flight from Khan Shayet in time to meet Gordon in western Nepal.



Bianca laughed and began piecing her thread of the story. Gavin had suddenly swooped down from nowhere in the later part of May, and taken her with him to join Toby somewhere along the old China silk route in Outer Mongolia; they then made straight for Kathmandu down through Lhasa, Tibet. They had just arrived not two hours back.

It was only then that I realized that they all three were still in their travel-stained clothes, Bianca dessed in a most peculiar Tibetan skirt and jacket, with laced soft leather boots on her small feet. She looked as regal and as proud as any one of those Tibetan princesses she had been among.

Gavin said, "We were caught in one of those earth-shaking avalanches that night when we'd left the Kirghiz camp." He told us of the remarkable escape. "And if Toby had not turned back during that blinding snowstorm, I feel sure that the Hunzukut man with me would have perished, as I would have too. But the avalanche saved us from the hands of Khan Shayet that winter. We had to hole up for the greater part of the winter, and the Hunzukut men kept us alive by using many ingenious tricks. When the thaws came at last, we made for China. Toby stayed with our caravan while I went back to search out Bianca and Tawny."

Bianca laughed, and I was aware of how beautiful her laugh was. "Gavin found me ready to set out from Nazar Shah's farm, because I was so forlorn and unhappy in not hearing from the Mir that you'd got through safely. In fact, we both learned from the Mir that Khan Shayet had struck out toward Leh in pursuit of a white woman! It was a fearful time. But Gavin asked me to marry him, and the Mir blessed our marriage before we set out to join Toby. We are so happy, Tawny dear. I hope you like the idea of my being your sister."

Nothing could have been more joyous; I fell into Gavin's arms, excited and crying too, and Gordon was swept up with this news as I was, while Sir Henry kept passing around our refilled glasses.

And then Gordon made our announcement to them. "Tawny!" Bianca cried. "You and Gordy? Oh, how marvelous. Simply marvelous! Oh, Gordy! I am so happy for you. Tawny is the most wonderful woman in the whole world, and I know she will make you happy."

It couldn't have pleased me more, but Gordon said, "I know she will make me happy, you little minx. But I can only hope I will make her just as happy. I consider myself a very fortunate man."

"And with this I certainly agree, Gordon," Toby said quietly, and I turned to look at this man I might have married had fate not intervened. And of this I was certain: Toby. Reliable, steady Toby. I loved him in a strange but tender way, not with the heady sweetness of my love for Gordon. He had turned back because of fate, and had brought my brother out of certain death. And in so doing, he had opened the doors for me to run into Gordon's love.

When we went in to dinner, Gavin and Bianca and Toby declined going in, for they wanted to take advantage of hot baths and sleep.

I don't remember much of the evening, for it whirled around me like a myriad of color and laughter and happiness in one great explosion. With Gordon at my side, his hand warm on my waist, or on my elbow, or just touching my hand, I stood on that brink of discovery with him, loving every second of it. I could not break the spell that came over me each time my eyes wandered to his face and found his eyes feeding on me.

I was hardly aware of time passing; the dinner was magnificent, and there seemed to be many people, and I had no remembrance of thinking one thought of Lindsey or why she had not put in an appearance. It seemed natural enough to just not think about her.

After the dinner, Gordon and I had our first waltz together. “Happy, my darling?” he said down at me. “You look ravishing. No wonder Toby was looking at you with his heart in his eyes. He loves you, you know. I saw it. Are you sure that you've chosen the right man?” There was a strange huskiness in his voice, and my heart nearly stopped beating.

“It might have been, Toby, but for . . . fate. Yes. But, there are no doubts in my mind or heart about my choice. You gave me no choice, you see.”

“And I need not fear . . . losing you to him?”

“Never. You will never need fear anyone.”

“Oh, my darling!” His hand tightened on my waist. “I can see that you are so good for me. I couldn't bear it if your heart were fixed on someone else. And that reminds me. I am very pleased that your brother is now my brother-in-law. At last I can feel free to say that Bianca has a husband who will answer to her peculiar needs. Let us be thankful for this.”

“Yes. Oh, yes. We have so much to be thankful for,” I said with a little catch in my throat. It was then that I caught a glimpse of Lindsey, and she was deep in conversation with someone I didn't know across the room. I think Gordon saw her too, but neither of us had time to comment on it. I frowned. When had she come in? I knew she must have been told how things had turned out for me and Gordon; there was no question of her not knowing it. And it occurred to me that she would have learned about the presence of Bianca and Toby and Gavin by now. Indeed, she was an attractive woman, and I had little darts of envy stabbing at my heart, for I knew she had been Gordon's mistress, even here in Kathmandu.

◆

Love is something so divine
Description would but make it less;
'Tis what I feel, but can't define,
'Tis what I know, but can't express

Beilby Porteus
On Love

Needing some tranquility after the dancing, I walked along the verandah until I came to the corner of the house, and it was then I heard a whisper. I turned to see Jaseen's face in the darkness.

“Jaseen!” I reached him, but before I could ask why he had come, he gestured to be quiet. He was pale, and unsmiling.

“You must come. Where Mr. Gordon? Must come quickly.” I heard the desperation in that sentence.

My heart stood still. “Jaseen. What is it? Is Mark—” I didn't finish my question, for I saw without a doubt that something had happened to Mark.

“You come, come . . .” and I saw the glimmer of tears in his own eyes. “Chanda and Mark gone! Someone come, take baby and Chanda. I not know who, not know when.” The words seemed choked in his throat.

In the next agonizing minutes, Jaseen and I raced back to Gordon's rooms and found Pemba trembling in fear.

I did not hesitate; I rushed into the reception room, demanded to know which room Tobias Roberts was in, and the sleepy night clerk had no choice but to tell me. When I reached his rooms, I knocked loudly, and it was somehow an eternity before the door opened and Toby stood there, his beard bright over the kimono he'd thrown around him.

“Tawny! What in God's name—” He saw Jaseen behind me.

“Toby. I need your help.”

“Come in, both of you. Now, tell me what is this all about?” He had command of the situation, and I blurted out, very badly, I know, the whole story.

“So, the baby and Chanda are missing?” he said at last. He had lighted a lamp and we were seated in deep armchairs of brown leather. “Do Gavin and Bianca know this?”

I shook my head. ‘No. I came to you first, because I know she hasn't even seen Mark. And Gordon has gone off to talk with Sir Henry.”

“Then we must search the grounds. We'll get a search party going right now. You sit tight while I get some clothes on. We'll get this solved before Bianca knows about it.”

By half past two in the morning, Toby had organized a search party that began a fine combing of every inch of the British compound grounds. He was thorough. I would have been in on the search myself, but Toby insisted that I remain in Lady Jennifer's company. And it was agony. Hot coffee was passed around, and Jane came up to me and took my hand. But nothing she could say could dispell the uneasiness that began to take possession of me.

I caught sight of Lindsey, and a horrible sinking feeling swept over me as I saw her walking toward me, her red mouth working strangely. She came very close to me, and stood over me, so that I would have no chance of escape, as if I had wanted to, and which I did want to before the minute was gone.

“Well, Tawny? What have you to say about all this?” She didn't speak loudly, but in a very calm soft voice, endurance in every syllable. Yet it was loud enough for everyone to turn and listen with sudden and startling sullen faces.

“What are you talking about, Lindsey?”

“Oh, I'm sure you must know, my dear Tawny! Lady Bianca's baby son disappeared from his crib . . .”

“Just what are you implying, Lindsey Pearson?” I asked.

“As if you didn't know, or shall I tell them?”

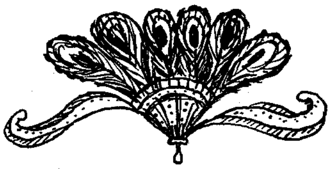
“Pray, dear Lindsey!” I said, laughingly. “And why should I want to take Bianca's baby, when I know she is here to claim him?” I stood up and faced her; then, because she stood so close, I gave her a gentle shove aside and strode across the room. It was just as well I did, for at that moment a shout came to us from the doorway.

“They are found! Both the nurse and the baby!”

Everyone turned to stare as Toby entered carrying Mark in his arms, with a bedraggled Chanda trailing after him, Jaseen and other men following, lanterns set aside on the verandah.

“They are both safe, Tawny,” Toby said. “And thank God! Chanda is a bit mussed up, I believe. Give her something hot to drink, please.” He spoke with full authority to one of the servants standing nearby. Then he handed Mark over to me.

The room behind us seemed to have come to a frozen standstill, and Toby walked inside and stood in front of Lindsey. “Lady Pearson,” he said gruff-



ly. "I believe Chanda has one hell of a story to tell us."

She had blanched white, but her eyes were angry. "I can't think what that would have to do with me. It's Tawny Butler—"

But Chanda, who had come into the room, ran over to Lindsey, and she hissed like a snake, and pointed her finger at Lindsey.

"Bad woman. Take baby. Tie Chanda up." It couldn't have been more dramatic or condemning.

Lindsey; however, chose to deny it strongly. But even as she began to protest, Toby shook his head. "You will have a lot of explaining to do, Lady Lindsey. But we all shall go into this at the proper time."

Beyond a doubt, Lindsey had been put in her place, for Toby explained. "We found them both in Lindsey's rooms. Chanda was bound and gagged and thrust behind a sofa. Mark was sleeping peacefully, but locked in a closet. So, dear Lady Lindsey. Behave yourself properly." Someone tittered in the background and I saw that shook her badly, for she began to tremble violently.

"Just who do you think you are, Mr. Roberts? I demand to see Gordon, to tell him the whole truth about . . . you and this little . .. doxy, Tawny—" He reached out and slapped her face with such a blow that it resounded in the room. She gasped, fell back, and then completely broke up. She screamed, demanding to see Gordon, stomping her foot, and only became quiet when Lady Jennifer, at Toby's suggestions, hurried over to her and, with another lady, helped her from the room, assuring Toby that they'd look after her.

It was a traumatic moment for all of us, and I hugged Mark to me, so grateful that he and Chanda were safe, when I realized tears were standing in my eyes.

Toby turned to me. "I'll get you back to Gordon's rooms, Tawny. Let's go now." He was the old loyal Toby, and something stuck in my throat as I followed him with Chanda and Jaseen behind, down the steps and into the night.

The dawn broke in the east, all crimson and gold over the snow peaks, massive, corrugated, which ringed the Kathmandu Valley. I stood on the verandah outside of Gordon's sitting room, with a cup of steaming coffee in my hands. I had changed from my silk gown into a jade-colored silk kimono, tied around the waist.

Toby stood there with me, quiet in deep study, smoking his comfortable old pipe.

"I could have loved you, Tawny," he said quietly. "You know that. But I do not wish to cause pangs of what might have been. Gordon is the fortunate man in this instance, and I do want to let you know I wish you both the best that life together can bring you. Please believe that."

It moved me more than any speech could have done. I couldn't speak for a moment, and when I did, I could only say, "Thank you, dear Toby."

Then he smiled at me in the old familiar way. "We have much to talk about, don't we, my girl?"

"Yes. Yes, we do."

He put his pipe aside and saw Pemba with the pot of coffee. "I'd like a cup of that, my boy," he said. We both leaned back on the verandah rail and sipped the coffee in silence for a small moment; then Toby said, looking up across the steam:

◆

Love, free as air at sight of human ties,
Spreads his light wings, and in a
moment flies.

Alexander Pope
Elosia to Abelard

"Have you ever heard of the Jade Pagoda, Tawny?"

I immediately thought of the two priceless pieces of jade that were made into pagodas, and which I had taken from around my waist not more than two hours ago.

"I am speaking of the name given to certain valuable and priceless Chinese jade pieces, made in the shape of pagodas. There are two of them sitting in safe locked glasses in cabinets in the manor hall of the Hardings' Devon home. They belonged to your grandfather, Tawny. He took them back to England from here, but because of existing debts, Lord Howard Harding claimed them as payment.

"There are two other such objects, Tawny, and it was for these that Khan Shayet murdered David Markus. I myself was baffled to no end when that Kirghiz chief carried out such ruthless measures; in fact, I had no knowledge of these valuable objects until Gavin told me about them. He's been working on this case for several years. For they've been missing links to a chain of smuggling priceless objects from the old palaces of long-gone wealthy noblemen throughout China."

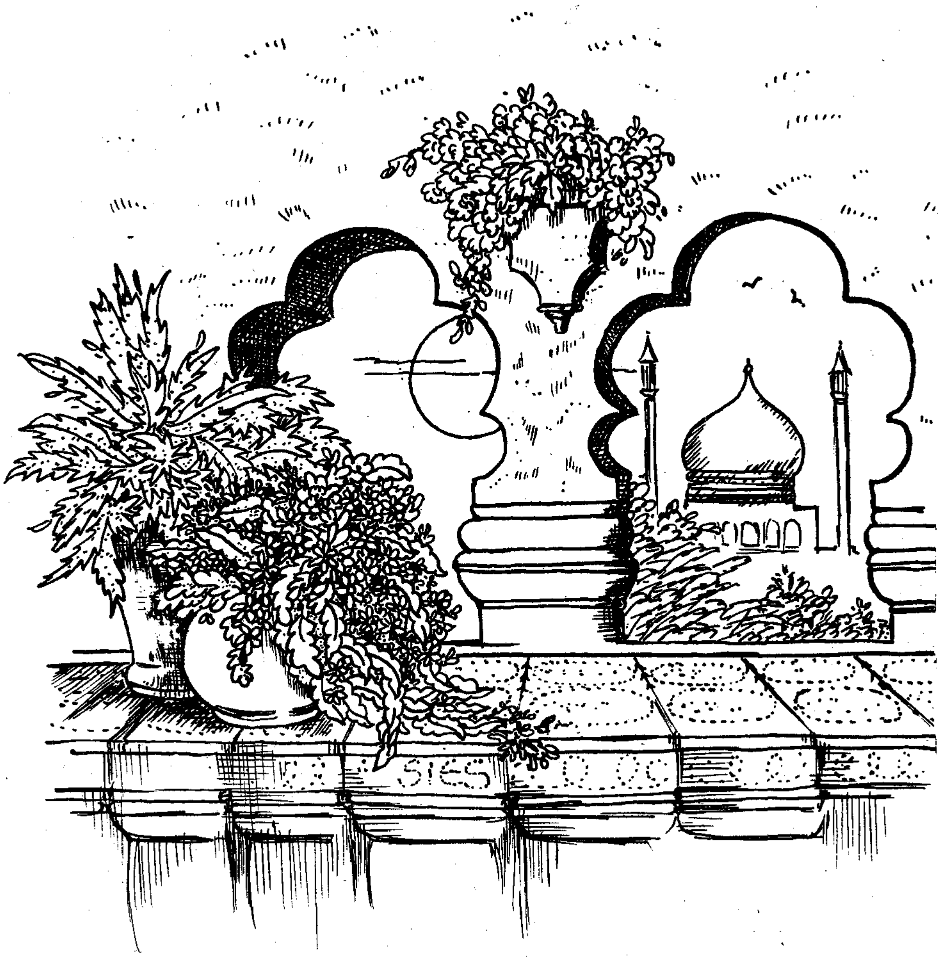
"And did Gavin know about the two which our grandfather had smuggled out?"

"Oh, yes. He was keen on discovering where they originated. He asked to be put on this particular case and Gordon, along with Sir Henry, knew he was just the man for solving it. Everyone suspected Markus and, by gad, he did have them!"

I shivered suddenly. "David gave me one of those pagodas, along with the documents of his marriage to Bianca, Toby. To hand over to Gordon. And Bianca had the other one. She gave it to me, and Khan Shayet pursued me all the way down through Ladakh and Tibet into Nepal because he knew I had them."

We heard the door open from inside and I turned anxiously, desiring to see Gordon, but it was Gavin, sleep still flushing his cheeks. At the sight of my brother, my heart dipped into a joy all over again that he was alive and here with me. I ran to him and he hugged me close, burying my head in his chest, while he kissed my forehead gently.

"Gavin, old boy," Toby said, "It seems as if your sister has the same keen spirit that you and your incredible grandfather, Sir James Butler, had for the intrigue and adventure of smuggling on the old caravan routes out here! She brought the jade pagodas down from



Hunza to Kathmandu, outwitting the old Kirghiz chief himself!" His eyes were full of laughter.

Gavin sat up. "You're joking! Tawny—" he stared at me, his face one of complete surprise.

I stood up, and walked across the room. "Wait here," I said, and I went into the bedroom where Chanda slept soundly with Mark curled into her bosom, and I lifted the petticoats I'd stripped off and removed the leather pouches, and returned to the sitting room.

I handed them over to Gavin. "Didn't Bianca tell you?"

He shook his head. "I didn't ask her. I believed they were lost. I had no idea that you had them." And I told them both how David had given the one to me, and then, later, Bianca had insisted that I bring them down to her brother.

"Gordon wanted me to keep them until we arrived here. He felt sure they were safe with me."

Neither man looked up at me, but had taken the beautiful glowing jade objects from the pouches and had placed them on a lacquered table in front of them. Then, carefully, they took the objects and twisted their gilt-edged roofs gently, and they opened. Gavin put a handkerchief down on the table and tipped the contents from it, as did Toby. It stunned us all, for a king's ransom of diamonds and emeralds and large glowing rubies fell out.

Gavin laughed. "Well, Tawny? You were just damned lucky that you didn't lose your head for this ransom! What an amazing turn of events! Khan Shayet will be waiting and watching no matter which way we go out, eh, Toby?" He chuckled deeply, then stood up. He stared at me strangely, but I could never have been so proud of such a look.

"What an incredible woman you are!" he finally said.

Toby grinned. "I thought so from the very first, when I saw her there in that lovely old house in Srinagar, Gavin. But she's one of us now."

Gordon and I were married one week later in a beautiful ceremony at the resident's chapel. I believe I could never have been a happier bride, because I had my brother to give me away.

So it all ended happily for me as I walked down the aisle on Gavin's arm, and spoke my vows with the man I loved, then came out into a paradise as his wife.

Bianca, who had been so obviously delighted to reunite herself with her little son, had had a long talk with Gordon. In the end, she gave Gordon and me the right to take him with us to Kashmir to raise in his tender years, because, as she said: "The highroads of China and Tibet are not the place to raise a child. And Gavin and I must be together now. You will both be good for him."

She and Gavin had taken it upon themselves to get the jade pagodas back to where they belonged, and Toby was going with them.

It was an incredible moment for all of us; it was still the old cloak-and-dagger intrigue with my brother, but it all appealed to Bianca, who, I learned, loved and trusted Gavin with a love that seemed more than a love. They seemed separate, and different from other people, sharing a thought together.

I liked the idea, and I knew it would be this way with Gordon and me. Thus we all set forth upon our different adventures on the same day: as Gordon and I started out for Kashmir, taking Mark and Chanda and Jaseen with us, another small caravan began climbing toward the great Himalayas to the north.

"Lady Tawny Harding," whispered my new husband in my ear. "You will have enough adventure from now on just being my wife. Don't you find that intriguing already?"

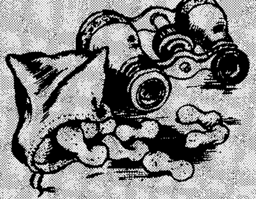
I looked into his smoke-grey eyes and knew that all of my happiness was in this very promising and real beginning.

"It's the most intriguing moment of my life," I said.

And he leaned over and kissed me gently, as a deep warm joy ran all through me. The future loomed bright, for we were together and we would come back to this lovely old kingdom when spring came around again. ◆

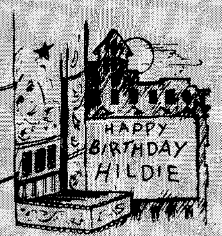
"How do I love thee..."

There are moments shared by people in love that remain forever fixed in one's memory. The moments we find most precious may differ but the thought, the pleasure, the surprise, and the meaning remain the same. These anecdotes reflect the various forms of love's expression; some involve famous people, some do not, but all are unique.



As a gift on her wedding day from her husband Charles McArthur, the great American actress, Helen Hayes, received a velvet pouch full of peanuts. Attached to the pouch was a note which read, "If only these were diamonds . . ."

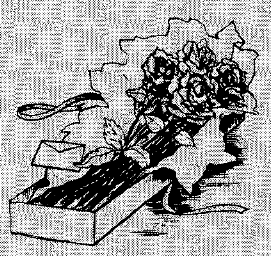
On the celebration of their thirtieth wedding anniversary, Miss Hayes again received a velvet pouch, this time filled, in fact, with sparkling diamonds accompanied by the note: "If only these were peanuts, Love Charlie."



At one time or another we have all pondered what special gift we might give to a loved one on their birthday. Such a dilemma confronted Alexander Cohn, the theatrical producer, on the advent of his wife, Hildie's, birthday. Driving down Broadway while apologizing to her for the absence of an appropriate expression of his birthday wishes, their car came to a halt. Peering out the window, she beheld his birthday greeting. Brightly painted across the entire side of a Broadway building were the words, "Happy Birthday, Hildie."

Henry White, a hard driving executive, suffered a heart attack at the end of one of his frequent sixteen-hour work days. Rushed to the hospital, he was placed in intensive care, surrounded by life support equipment and permitted neither a phone nor visitors.

Shortly after his wife returned home from the hospital, feeling alone and exhausted, a box of twelve long-stemmed red roses was delivered with a card bearing the following inscription: "From Henry, whose heart aches for you."



For several years, John McHenry and his wife, Connie, had spoken of and dreamed about an addition to their family. Now, after a very long nine months, and a four-day stay in the hospital, Connie and her newborn daughter Melissa were leaving for home. There at the hospital exit John waited in a gleaming white, chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. After a brief ride, the limousine turned into their drive, and as Connie stepped out of the car, high above in the sky a plane was twisting and twirling, skywriting the message, "Welcome Home Connie and Melissa."

WELCOME
HOME

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . . If you'd like to share with us some of the unique ways love has been expressed in your life, please send in your favorite story to: How Do I Love Thee? CAMEO Magazine, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, Suite #921, New York, NY 10020.

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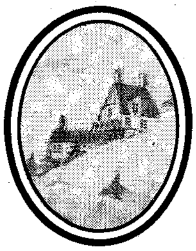
Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

the voice from the cave



(Continued from page 12)

miles to Paris, hoping that the legendary romance of that city would rub off on her and help bring her emotions back to an even keel. Mary was a great believer in fate, but her belief was beginning to waiver.

She spent a week wandering through the streets of Paris, playing the high-living tourist game in the clubs, and, in general, forcing herself to have a good time. She even had a mild flirtation with a local ladies' man, but it didn't pack the relish it should have. Romance in Paris, and she might as well be watching a newscast in her own apartment. Everything was just surface glitter, so she packed up and headed for home. Most of the flight was taken up with the invention of stories she would be expected to tell.

Summer disappeared into fall and one Saturday afternoon, Mary answered the insistent ringing of the phone.

"It's Jane, Mary. What are you doing tonight?"

"Oh, I thought I'd just stay home, Jane. I've been burning that candle lately."

"I have an offer you can't refuse. I have two tickets to the National Architectural Awards dinner tonight. It's going to be held at that swanky new Oakley Plaza Hotel. Have you been to the banquet room?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, you just have to go with me. I hear it's really something and it's called the Swiss Room. That should turn you on."

"Well . . ."

"Okay, that's as good as a yes. I'll pick you up at six. It shouldn't take any more than an hour to get there."

"All right, Jane, you talked me into it."

At six thirty, Jane appeared at Mary's door. "I'm sorry I'm late—traffic like molasses."

"No problem."

"Great, we're off then."

About an hour later, they arrived at the hotel. The car was parked with little fuss, and they made their way rapidly through the lobby to the Swiss Room. When they entered, they found themselves inside a giant cave. There were stalactites, stalagmites, and columns composed of both. The stalactites were actually lights. The room was packed, but nonetheless it was beautiful. Jane looked at Mary to check her reaction.

"Mary, what's wrong? You look so strange."

"I don't know. I feel strange, too. Something just came over me when we walked in here. Let's get something to eat. Maybe that will help."

Fortunately, there were two vacant seats left at a table directly in front of the speaker's table. They slid into these just as the waiters started serving dinner.

During the meal, normal chatter flowed back and forth across the table —mostly in the form of awed comments about the magnificent hotel and the Swiss Room. Mary remained strangely silent. Instead of carrying on a conversation, she was staring at a man seated at the speaker's table. She couldn't take her eyes from him. She nudged Jane.

"Who is that Norse god up there?"

"Up where?"

"Where? How many Norse gods do you see in here? The one in the center of the speaker's table. The one with two cubic feet of blond hair and twelve-foot shoulders."

"Oh, him. You exaggerate slightly. Ten-foot shoulders maybe. I don't know, but he must be important. That's the honored seat."

Mary continued to stare at him. Her face was flushed, her eyes glassy.

"You okay, Mary?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but whatever it is, I hope it doesn't go away. If this is love, I'll take a double order."

"Love?"

"I have a feeling I'm going to marry that man. I can feel it in my toes."

"That's more apt to be gout, Mary, but lots of luck."

A tall, distinguished-looking man stood up and rapped for attention.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Charles Ball, chairman of the Awards Committee and I'm doubly excited tonight. Not only are we holding our dinner in the brand-new Oakley Plaza Hotel, but we are honoring the designer and chief architect of this marvelous structure. And so, without further comment, may I introduce our principal speaker for the evening, Bob Prince of the firm Robert Prince of New York."

"Thank you, Charles, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the very warm reception. The most-asked question about this hotel is where I got the idea for the Swiss Room. It was the summer before last, and I was doing some postgraduate work at the University of Zürich. This is near the resort town of Langenbourg and . . ."

The words flowed on, but Mary didn't hear them consciously. She was daydreaming of her wedding, with Robert Prince cast as the groom. The images of organdy, lace, picket fences, and old oak trees ran crazily through her dream.

All of a sudden a light bulb turned on in her mind. A few phrases from his speech filtered through her reverie. Such as, *a couple of summers ago in Zürich* and *weekend trips to Langenbourg* and *picking up expense money by playing the magic elf trapped in a cave to amuse the hotel guests.*

"Thank you, Mr. Prince."

Charles Ball's voice cut through her thoughts. *That name,* she thought. *How stupid of me. Robert Prince of New York—with a little jumbling around—becomes Trebor, Prince of Kroywen. Okay, Robert Prince. I'm going to call you on that deal you made, but you'll never know it, and in the future, on a certain day in June, every year, you're going to think you married a witch.*

"If you'll excuse me, Jane, that old biddy sitting next to Mr. Prince seems to have him backed into a hole. I'm going over there to see if I can get him out."

The General's Extravagant Empress

(Continued from page 15)

"Napoleon . . . it's a strange name," Rose drawled.

"Napoleone means 'lion of the valley'," he muttered. The man who had stood before the greatest armies of Europe without a tremor seemed suddenly shy.

Taking his arm, Rose strolled with him out into the gardens. "I was named Josephe-Rose. Rose for my mother," she said, attempting to put the General at his ease, "and Josephe for King Louis XVI's mother. As a youth, my father served as her honor page for five years. Ah! I should not be telling a General of the Republic about my connections with the old regime. You may want to place my head on the block," she said slyly, her arched lids and long, black lashes veiling dark blue eyes.

"Never! It is not the block where I wish to place your head. You are a goddess. Divine! Someday I will place your head upon the pillow of our marriage bed. There! I have said it. I wish to strip from your body the last film of chiffon, your slippers, everything, and then as in a dream, I want to swoop you up and enclose you, imprison you within my heart."

"You are funny." She was greatly amused by this fiery young man six years her junior. "Although I cannot promise to marry you, I will let you call me Rose, as my friends do."

"No! I shall call you only Josephine, my Josephine. It is a name no other man has ever called you. When you hear me utter your name you will be hearing it from a man's lips for the first time. As Josephine, you will be mine, totally mine."

That is how it began. He pursued her relentlessly, escorting her to the Opéra, the theatre, to receptions and soirees. They exchanged portraits, and within several months they became lovers. Armies had fallen before him, so how could an indifferent little Creole hope to resist?

"Between your portrait and the memory of our intoxicating night, my senses have no respite," he wrote her. "Sweet and incomparable Josephine, what is this bizarre effect you have upon my heart? I send you a thousand and one kisses, but send me none in return, for they set my blood on fire."

Josephine did not reply to his letter, instead she wrote to her friend Madame Tallien, "Darling, wear your peach-blossom dress to the Thélusson's ball tonight, and I'll wear mine . . . with a Creole turban and three curls on my forehead."

Josephine's maddening indifference to Napoleon continued until he received his military orders to return to the battlefields in Italy. When he beseiged his Josephine to marry him and accompany him as his wife, she was unable to make up her mind.

"Do I love him, you ask me?" she wrote to a friend. "Well, no. Do I find him attractive? Again, no. Yet, the force of his passion leaves no doubt of his sincerity. And, he wishes to serve as father to my orphans. . . ."

She was thirty-two, with expensive tastes, two children to support, and did not waver long in her decision. Her children were summoned and a civil marriage ceremony was performed. Josephine was glamorous in one of her diaphanous clinging tunics with a gold fillet confining her chestnut curls.

A gold wedding band was slipped on the bride's finger. Napoleon had the ring engraved, "To Destiny."

"You must not marry this young Corsican upstart," Maître Raguideau, the notary, counselled Josephine minutes before the ceremony was to begin. "It is folly to marry this military man devoid of fortune, an adventurer, younger than yourself."

"Nonsense," Josephine laughed sweetly. "Someday he will crown me Queen of France."

Fortuné, Josephine's fawn pug dog, objected to Napoleon most of all. He shared Josephine's bed and would not be put off by his new master.

"Ah, Josephine," Napoleon sighed in resignation. "For you I will even endure Fortuné, although he is less accommodating than I, of which I bear proof on my leg."

After only thirty-six hours of blissful honeymoon, of living in her sweet and gentle realm, Napoleon tore himself away from Josephine. His sword at his side, he rode off to his military campaigns in Italy. As his carriage drove away down the long driveway between the double row of lime trees, he waved and threw kisses back to his Josephine until she was no longer in sight.

"Thirty-six hours!" he wrote her. "I could not have had enough of you in thirty-six days, thirty-six months, thirty-six years! Josephine, what emotions you have aroused in me. A thousand kisses, one even for Fortuné, wicked beast that he is! Remember, there has never been a love like mine. It will last as long as my life."

Napoleon's military campaigns in Italy were brilliant. Victory after victory was won regardless of the odds against him. His detractors said Napoleon's successes were due to the fact that he was anxious to be reunited with Josephine.

Josephine enjoyed the acclaim that all France placed upon her husband, but she preferred to enjoy it in the glittering, glamorous salons of Paris, and in the company of her young admirer, the nobleman Hippolyte Charles. Napoleon called Charles a foppish hairdresser only hussies could like, but Josephine was charmed enough by the man to put off joining her husband in Italy in every way she could in order to stay with Charles in Paris.

When she could delay no longer, she finally joined Napoleon in Italy, with the artist Gros in tow to paint her a portrait of Napoleon. Napoleon was flattered, and her indifference to him was immediately forgiven.

As befitting the wife of the conqueror of Italy, Josephine was awarded the treasures of Italy: a superb pearl necklace, magnificent gems and ornaments, and a collection of the rarest cameos ever assembled. Josephine loved beautiful objects, and when she returned to Paris both her jewel case and her carriage were bulging, the latter with paintings, bronzes, and marbles. Napoleon scolded his wife on her extravagance but he could deny her nothing.

"Bonaparte . . ." Josephine sighed to a friend. "I am very fond of him, despite his little faults."

Napoleon's successes in Egypt continued. His magnificent victories were responsible for placing him at the head of the new Consulate Government when the government of the Directoire fell. Josephine was nearing her destiny. Soon she would be Queen of France.

But she was far from happy. While Napoleon was still in Egypt, her enemies began a campaign against her. Napoleon needed an heir, and Josephine, nearing forty, could not give him one. With the threat of divorce and the thought of losing Napoleon hovering over her, Josephine suddenly realized she was as desperately in love with him as he was with her.

To compensate for her misery, she went on a spending spree. Knowing her husband loved to see her in filmy white, she ordered a gown to wear at the great summer ball onto which were sewn hundreds of fresh rose petals. Napoleon was delighted with her until he received the bill.

He stormed into Josephine's dressing room like a wild boar and raged at her about her mania for spending, flinging her perfumes right and left.

"This extravagance of yours must stop!" he ranted. "You will bankrupt me yet."

"My spending is only an excuse for you to scold me," Josephine wept. "You are angry with me because I cannot give you an heir."

Unable to bear her tears, Napoleon pulled Josephine into his lap and held her.

"Do not fret so, my Josephine," he said, fondling her. "There is time for us yet."

"I am forty-one," Josephine whispered.

The pressures on Napoleon to produce an heir were enormous, but not enough to stop him from making Josephine's son, Eugène, the Viceroy of Italy. As though this were not enough, he also arranged Hortense's marriage to his brother Louis and made her Queen of Holland. As he put it to Josephine, "Then if we fail to have children, one of your daughter Hortense's sons will be my heir."

Still, Napoleon's family urged him to divorce Josephine. Instead he presented her with the crown jewels of Marie Antoinette and proceeded to make her his Empress.

In the days preceding the coronation, the streets thronged with excitement from morning until night. The greatest artists and couturiers in France labored for weeks designing Josephine's costume and those of her court ladies. The latter wore long mantles with splendid ruffs of embroidered lace, called *cherusques*, rising from their shoulders to frame their necks and faces.

On the day of the coronation in the Cathedral of Notre Dame Josephine looked not a day over twenty-five. Resplendent in diamonds, her hair was arranged in a mass of ringlets, her gown and court cape of white satin embroidered in gold and silver. Napoleon, too, was brilliant in crimson velvet, a great ermine cloak placed about his shoulders and Caesar's golden laurel crown upon his head.

Josephine watched with a beating heart as the Pope annointed her husband's hands and brow with the triple unction and gave the benediction. At the moment when the Holy Father reached for the crown of Charlemagne, Napoleon took it into his own hands and placed it upon his head. Then he signalled Josephine to come forward.

She advanced gracefully toward the altar, her scarlet velvet train held by her greatest enemies, Napoleon's three sisters. Maliciously, the Bonaparte princesses allowed the full weight of the train to fall against Josephine, making her stagger backwards. Napoleon's eagle eye took in the scene and, with a piercing hiss, he warned the malefactors. The sisters promptly picked up the train and allowed Josephine to proceed. As Josephine knelt before the altar, the couple gazed at one another and a fleeting moment of pure felicity flowed from one to another, binding them together.

Napoleon removed the crown from his head and, with painstaking care, placed it on Josephine's head over her tiara. The glamorous Creole was Empress of France.

During the six short years Josephine reigned as Empress never once did she falter or stumble over protocol or commit a social or diplomatic blunder. She was grace personified, a vision in her misty white *mousseline de l'Inde*, her coiffure like that of an antique cameo with curls spilling out of a golden circlet. Even her enemies had to agree she was the most elegant of women.

And her enemies were plentiful, led by Napoleon's brothers and sisters. They could not forgive her infertility and were jealous of Napoleon's continued devotion to her. Napoleon enraged his family further by adopting Josephine's son, Eugene and placing him in the line of succession along with Hortense's sons, Josephine's grandchildren.

The Empress remained indifferent to her in-laws and gloried in her role. She moved about her court like a fairy queen lavishing luxury after luxury upon herself. She could not, however, deny that she was forty-five, and realize that after thirteen years of marriage she would never give her husband a child. Napoleon desperately needed an heir.

Josephine told Napoleon that she could not bear to leave him but that if he insisted she go, she would comply with his wishes. For all her determination to be brave, when Napoleon finally told Josephine about the divorce, she clung to him, one minute telling him she would go, the next saying she would never leave him. When she realized that Napoleon's decision was final, she screamed, "No! No! No, I will never survive it!" and fainted dead away.

Within a year Napoleon married the nineteen-year-old Austrian Archduchess Marie Louise, and the following year, his son, the King of Rome, was born.

Josephine was not without her suitors, but, still desperately in love with Napoleon, she turned them all away. Even the Crown Prince Frederick Louis of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, who had loved her openly for years, was refused.

After the divorce a strange fate began to befall Napoleon. Without Josephine at his side he began to make the wrong political decisions for the first time in his life. Suddenly, he also met defeat in battle, something that had never occurred when he was married to her, when his soldiers worshipfully called her "our lady of victories." When he divorced Josephine, Napoleon had been at the zenith of his power. In the five years since their divorce, he had lost everything. His world in ashes around him, defeated on every side, he even met the lowest indignity of all by being exiled. The news of his misfortune killed Josephine. A month after Napoleon reached Elba, she was dead.

Some say Josephine died of a chill caught when she went riding dressed in one of her flimsy frocks, but it was a broken heart that killed her. Elegant even on her deathbed, dressed in rose-colored satin and beribboned in white, she went to meet death as sweetly and gently as she had met life.

Napoleon was stricken with inconsolable grief at the news of Josephine's death. He shut himself up in his chambers for several days, refusing to see anyone. When he finally reappeared, his pallor was chalky white and his hands trembled. Perhaps in part to assuage his terrible grief, he often spoke of Josephine.

"She was the most alluring, most glamorous creature I have ever known," he said. "A woman in the true sense of the word, and with the kindest heart. Gentle, sweet, and captivating . . . she spoiled me for all other women. I may have won battles, but Josephine conquered hearts. She was destined to be Empress, you know. Yes, that was her fate and I rose on her rising star, not she on mine. When I divorced her, I destroyed myself, and brought ruin to France."

When Napoleon died, a portrait of Josephine hung in his room at the foot of his bed, directly in his line of vision. Marie Louise had deserted him long ago, taking her son with her. It was after Waterloo, and he had been exiled in St. Helena. His last words were, "France . . . the army . . . Josephine."

But the story does not end there. Thirty years later, Josephine's grandson, the son of her daughter Hortense, rode triumphantly into Paris to be crowned Emperor Napoleon III. Upon his finger he wore Josephine's wedding ring engraved with the words, "To Destiny"!

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Editor's Note

By 1780 Josephine's marriage to the flagrantly unfaithful Viscount Alexandre de Beauharnais had reached such a state of despair that she placed herself in the Pentemont, a resort for ladies of quality in distress and Paris's most fashionable convent. At Pentemonte, Josephine familiarized herself with the lofty world of the French court, the intricacies of courtiers' expertise and the infinite nuances of class distinction. Ironically, the tradition, etiquette and protocol she learned became useful to her in her own court, not in Marie Antoinette's. It was also at the convent that Josephine acquired her passion for clothes and jewelry.

Nine years later, on July 14, 1789 the Revolution began with the Fall of the Bastille. Josephine's estranged husband was executed on July 24, 1794 and, because she had tried to help him, Josephine was imprisoned. She was sentenced to be executed when Robespierre was killed and the Reign of Terror ended.

When Napoleon first saw Josephine she wore her hair cropped in the coiffure à la *guillotine and was the most glittering fashion plate in Paris. Nudity was the style. Women wore light, flimsy fabrics and little else and the disease of pneumonia reached epidemic proportions.*

At the time of their meeting, Napoleon cut a slightly ridiculous figure; he was a skinny, badly dressed twenty-four-year-old Corsican who spoke French with a thick provincial accent. His lack of knowledge of the French language had made him the brunt of all the students' jokes at the military academy at Autun, and he was still prey to the insecurities he had acquired at school. One of the reasons Napoleon adored Josephine was because she was able to put him so completely at ease.

Their love affair was totally one-sided at first. Napoleon was bewitched by Josephine who was merely amused and indifferent to his excesses of passion. In fact, shortly after their marriage, Josephine began her affair with suave, sophisticated Hippolyte Charles. The affair continued even during Napoleon's campaign in Italy and when she joined him there, Josephine was still indifferent to her ardent husband whom she always called Bonaparte. It was not until Napoleon went to Egypt that he heard about Josephine's affair with Charles. Then, his pride bitterly wounded, Napoleon threatened Josephine with divorce.

The threat made Josephine realize how much she would be losing and in time, how much she loved her husband. But the tide of love had turned and Napoleon took his revenge in a series of meaningless affairs aimed primarily at wounding his faithless wife. Throughout the rest of their married life, Napoleon continued to flaunt his affairs before Josephine, who had now become a chaste and devoted wife. Napoleon's affair with Countess Marie Waleska, the only mistress he seemed to have any real feeling for, and the subsequent birth of their illegitimate son, made Napoleon realize that the fault for his childless marriage to Josephine was not his and that, he must, for the sake of the Empire, divorce his still beloved wife.

Josephine's wild extravagances and compulsive spending habits were beyond Napoleon's control. Her insolvency was lifelong and her mania for spending provided a staggering wardrobe consisting of 679 dresses in addition to 49 court dresses of gold-encrusted tulle, silks, satins and muslins. She collected 785 slippers, 413 pairs of hose, 498 chemises, and 252 hats. Napoleon once became so enraged he had her milliner arrested. But, four hours later, Josephine had her husband laughing and the milliner was released.

Josphine's happiest hours were spent in her mirrored marble and frescoed dressing room where she luxuriated under the hands of her pedicurist, manicurist and masseuse. In her gilded mirrors, she found reassurance that her grace and beauty would continue to bind her husband to her. Still, her preoccupation with adorning her body and her exalted position did not turn her head. She remained the languid, gracious Creole, kind and overly generous to everyone, even to her power-hungry, back-biting in-laws.

She lived with Napoleon in the Tuilleries Palace, at the palace of St. Cloud and Elysée but the couple were always happiest at Josephine's Chateau Malmaison. (She had bought that, too, with borrowed money.) She was the perfect wife for Napoleon both temperamentally and physically.

"She was the most alluring, most glamorous creature I have ever known," Napoleon said, shortly before his death. "A woman in the true sense of the word and with the kindest heart. Gentle, sweet, and captivating . . . she spoiled me for all other women. I may have won battles, but Josephine won hearts."

Josephine died in 1814 at Malmaison surrounded by her children and admirers. Seven years later, Napoleon died in exile on St. Helena, facing a portrait of Josephine that hung on the wall opposite the foot of his bed. His last words were, "France . . . the Army . . . Josephine."

My Beloved Island

A CAMEO NOVEL

(Continued from page 23)

right about it being dreary. About eight-thirty, then?"

I knew Marcus was watching me as I spoke. I hadn't even asked him if he wanted to go, but anything, I thought, would be better than spending the evening together bickering. I knew the problem had to be solved, but I needed time to think about it. I didn't want to give Marcus the chance to make any snap decisions for me.

He said in an annoyed tone, "You might have asked me if I wanted to go. You seem to forget that my time is limited and that there is a lot to settle."

"There certainly is plenty to settle, but we're unlikely to come to any decision tonight, so we may as well spend the evening pleasantly."

I knew that he was still annoyed, but I left him and went down to the office to deal with the happier business of oranges and olives.

When finally we walked over to the Kingstons' villa, Marcus had recovered his temper and voiced no dislike of the evening ahead; and when, after coffee, Lise suggested showing him round their estate, I noticed he accepted with alacrity. It was an arrangement which suited me because it gave me the chance to speak to Marie and Ric alone.

Almost before they were out of sight, Marie said, "You're worried, aren't you?"

She could have meant at losing Father, only I knew she hadn't.

"Marcus wants us to sell the estate."

I saw her glance quickly across at Ric before she replied,"You mean Edward left the groves to *Marcus?*" She sounded both surprised and puzzled.

"No, he left three-quarters to me and one-quarter to Marcus."

I watched their reactions carefully. It was Ric who spoke first, his blue eyes studying me. "Then it is you who have the greater say in what is to be done."

"Yes, I know but—"

"Surely, you're not saying that *you* want to sell? Why it's unthinkable!"

I smiled at Marie's emphatic voice. "No, of course I don't want to sell but, you see, Marcus insists on selling his share. There isn't any doubt in *his* mind about selling, and—" I paused, "and he cannot understand why *I* don't want to."

Marie nodded. "No, I don't suppose he can. He simply views all this as so much potential money to be put into something in which *he* is interested." She smiled, "I suppose it is too much to expect people outside this way of life to realize what it means to us. Perhaps we are a little mad to work so hard and so long. Nobody else can know the deep satisfaction and pleasure."

I said sharply, "I don't *expect* him to understand, but it *is* an impossible situation. How could he sell a quarter of the estate without upsetting the rest? It's not practical but I can't see a way round it."

Ric sat up. "The estate must be appraised. You pay him a quarter of its value, and everybody is satisfied."

It sounded wonderfully simple. Except for one thing. I was tolerably certain there would not be enough spare money readily available for me to pay off Marcus. During recent years Father had put all the profits into expansion and because he also had heavy commitments with all the things he did for the islanders, he had never accumulated any great amount of capital. He had built the local hospital, providing all modern equipment, and he gave a considerable sum yearly for its upkeep. I pointed all this out to Ric who seemed a trifle surprised. He rose to bring me a drink. After a minute he said, "It *is* a valuable estate and would fetch a large sum in the market. Even a quarter would represent a considerable amount."

I nodded. I was only too well aware of the impossibility of finding such a sum in order to buy out Marcus, although I wanted to do that more than anything.

Filling his own glass and one for Marie, Ric said suddenly, "All right—have the estate properly valued, see how much money you can scrape up yourself, and I'll lend you the rest."

I remained silent so long that at last he added with a smile, "Don't worry. It will be a business arrangement, though my terms may be a trifle more lenient than if you borrowed from a bank."

"But I couldn't let you do that." I looked at him in bewilderment, not knowing what to say.

I was aware of Marie watching me, waiting for my answer. She said, "Why are you hesitating?"

I pulled myself together quickly.

"I know it would solve my difficulties." I looked helplessly from one to the other. "But why on earth should Ric do this for me?"

Marie smiled. "We've been friends for a long time, and we are very fond of you. Besides, as Ric said, this is a business proposition. Ric is always a good businessman, he always demands a fair return for his money. He isn't offering you a gift."

I sat silent for a moment. Perhaps I was making a mountain out of a molehill.

Ric said with a smile, "Well, make up your mind, and all your troubles will be over."

"May I have time to think? It's a wonderful offer and I don't know how to thank you but—"

Ric waved an expansive hand. "By all means, take time to think—but not too long if Marcus wants his money quickly. These things take time to fix and he won't want to miss this chance of being able to afford a partnership."

At that moment, Lise entered the room looking like a cat who had stolen the cream. I glanced quickly at Marcus as he came in behind her and saw with amusement that he had lipstick on one corner of his mouth.

I had dreaded the funeral and now it was over. The little white church had been overflowing, a wholly spontaneous tribute to Edward Carlion whom all these simple people had loved and admired. The man who had always been ready to help and advise, who had never refused assistance when it was needed.

Now I had to equate this side of his character with the man who had condoned the stealing of a baby from a young mother. The same man who had given me the loving care of a father, knowing that I was not his daughter. I couldn't understand the contradiction of character, but of one thing I was certain: only some overpowering reason would have made him agree to allow his wife to keep the baby she had stolen. I heard again his dying words: "I want you to try to find her."

Now, as I thought of them, they could only mean one thing: Edward Carlion wanted me to find my mother.

I didn't even know her name or the place where she lived. The task seemed impossible, yet I knew that for my own peace of mind, I had to try.

Marcus was returning to England in a day and I had come to a decision about borrowing the money from Ric. It hadn't been until dinner the night after the funeral, and a speech from Marcus delivered in a high-handed manner precipitated me into a final decision.

He said, "I've been making inquiries about land agents on the island."

I said irritably, "For what reason?"

"Don't be ridiculous, you know the reason."

I helped myself to cheese. "I have no intention of selling."

In the candlelight his eyes looked almost black. Perhaps with rage. "I told you, I need the money."

"I am having the estate valued, and as soon as I have the figures I will pay you your quarter share."

My voice was very calm and I waited for the storm to break as he continued to stare at me. Finally, he asked with equal calm, "You have sufficient money to do that?" and I nodded, as if it were the sort of transaction I dealt in every day.

After a pause, he said with a shrug, "Well, I suppose that will suit me as well as any other way, though why you object to selling, I can't imagine."

"No. I am sure you can't. You don't know Corsica, you see."

"You could have a better life in England."

I shook my head. "Not me. I have everything I want here."

He smiled. "The island or a boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend—the island."

"You're not lonely?"

"No. Never."

"Would you mind if I came out occasionally?"

It was so unexpected that I felt confused.

"No—no,of course not. It would be nice for you to know the island better."

"And see what I have been missing all this time." His tone was light, and this rather unlikely conversation was the nearest approach to communication we had made. Perhaps because we had managed after all to settle the main problem amicably.

I said, "Do you still ride?"

"Not very often. I don't have the time."

"There will be time tomororw. Your plane doesn't leave until evening. We could ride in the morning, if you'd like, and I could show you some of the villages up here."

I saw him hestiate, then he said, "All right—why not?"

Later, when I was returning from the office, I overheard him on the phone as I paused for a moment on the patio. His voice came clearly through the open window.

"Yes, I know what we arranged, but my sister wants me to ride with her, and, under the circumstances, I think I must do that."

I moved away quickly, going round to the back entrance of the house. By the time I entered the hall from the kitchen, Marcus was sitting by the window reading.

Obviously, he had been cancelling a date with Lise. I suppose I should be feeling grateful that he was honoring me with his presence at the expense of a much more pleasant morning. Instead, all I felt was anger; I thought suddenly that now I understood his reason for wanting to return to Corsica.

We decided to start very early the next morning. When I knocked on his door, Marcus was already dressed. We had breakfast and were away from the villa by seven-thirty. I was riding my own horse, Beau, and Marcus rode Father's, Midas. Both horses were strong and sturdy, well suited to the often rough ground they had to travel.

We reached the little village of Lumio about an hour later, and I asked Marcus if he remembered it.

"Only very vaguely. I remember the little white church with the open turret and the bell showing through."

The sun had reached the small square. A donkey in a cart waited patiently for something to happen. Two women chattered outside a doorway. Some chickens ran clucking at the sound of the horses' hooves. A child ran out of a house laughing. Otherwise, everything was very quiet. I glanced at Marcus as he sat holding the reins lightly, his eyes taking in the peaceful scene. I wondered, what were his thoughts? Boredom at such simplicity, or was he capable of appreciating this little place as I was? It was nothing that could be put into words. You either felt it or you didn't. Nobody could give it to you if you lacked it. As I watched him, he smiled and turned to me.

"Yes, I see what you mean—there's something about the atmosphere that gets you."

I felt almost childishly pleased. I turned my horse, and he followed me, and for a time we rode in silence until we reached a point where we could look down to the coast toward the little town of Algajola where the sea beyond was intensely blue.

I said suddenly, "I think he wanted me to find my mother."

Marcus showed no surprise. He said, "But I don't think he ever knew her name."

"No."

"Then how could you find her? Where would you start to look?"

I frowned, staring down at the sunlit scene below.

"I've been thinking. We know where Mother—your mother went to have her baby, and that she stayed for a week in the same place in a hotel after she came out of the nursing home. She stayed until the specialist said she was well enough to come home. It would have to be in that district."

For a moment, he didn't answer. Midas pawed the ground, anxious to be off.

"What makes you think Father wanted you to search for her?"

"When he was dying, he kept telling me to 'find her'. He was very weak, but I am sure now that is what he meant. I hadn't understood at the time."

"I don't think you realize all that it would entail."

"Very likely not—almost certainly not, but all the same, I must try."

"You mean, come to England?"

"Of course."

He turned Midas, and we continued to ride along a road which ran for some time in sight of the sea.

"It sounds crazy to me. How could you hope to find any trace after all this time? It isn't very likely that she'd be living in the same place now."

"I know all that, but I *must* try," I said stubbornly.

After a moment's silence, he shrugged. "Well, of course it's entirely up to you, but don't be disappointed if you get no results."

Soon afterward, we stopped, leaving the horses to graze around us as we sat on the ground to eat the lunch we had brought. Behind us, mountains rose steeply, bright with the flowering bushes called the maquis which scented the whole island. Except for the sound of running water, it was silent. Marcus lay back, his hands behind his head. I could almost have liked him in that moment of relaxation, but we seemed to have no real touching point. Perhaps there was too much behind us for that ever to be possible.

By the time I was able to settle things enough to go to England, Marcus had been gone for nearly a month. I left the groves in Mario's and Francine's care; they had been with us for so many years they were well able to handle things alone until my return.

My flight was quite unmemorable. All I do recall of it are my own thoughts. I fretted the entire way that I hadn't let Marcus know I would be in England. He had seemed so opposed to the idea of my going on this quest, that it hadn't seemed wise to ask him to put me up—and without having to ask him that, I had seen no reason to contact him at all. Now, I wished I had told him I would be there. At least we could have got together for tea. I pushed the thoughts of him from my mind. What should he matter to me anyway? This was a personal matter between me and whoever the woman was I was seeking.

Because some friend had recommended this particular specialist, Margaret Carlion had had her baby in a small town in Surrey, and after she had lost it had stayed in a nearby hotel until the doctor thought her fit enough to return to Corsica. It was here that I began my search. Marcus had not known the names of the nursing home or hotel, only the town in which she had stayed.

I felt entirely alien as I stood outside the small station hoping to find a taxi. The ticket collector assured me that there were two, one of which would be sure to return before long. I put down my case and prepared to wait, having ascertained from my informant that the best place to stay was a small hotel up the hill. My wait was brief. In a moment a taxi arrived.

The taxi deposited me in front of a pleasant-looking hotel. The room I was given had a view of the Surrey Downs. The day was bright and sunny, but after Corsica, it seemed to me to have little warmth in it. I turned away from the window, deciding to ask at the desk where the library could be found.

It was not far away; an elderly woman in charge at the desk was pleasant and anxious to help, but said that newspaper records were not kept at small local libraries. She thought that Croydon might have them. It was late to travel there that day, but the next morning, I arrived at the Croydon Library almost as soon as it opened.

My birthday is in December and I am now twenty-three, so I asked to see papers of that month and year. I tried the Surrey ones first, then the London ones. It took a long time to go through them and by the time I had come to the end of the stack, I was as ignorant as when I started. There was no mention anywhere of a baby being stolen. Disconsolately, I gathered up the pile of papers to return them to the desk. The girl said brightly that she hoped I had found what I needed. I shook my head. "No, it's not there, yet I'm sure it must have been reported."

Picking up the papers, she said, "You are sure you have the right dates?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but thanks all the same."

I turned away and had nearly reached the door when an idea struck me. My birthday is in December but they couldn't have known exactly when I was born. The date they had chosen could only be approximate. Presumably, I was a few weeks old when I was taken from my pram. I turned back eagerly to the girl at the desk.

"You've given me an idea. Could I see the local papers for January of the following year?"

After a wait, she brought them to me and I began the search all over again.

It was another hour before I found it. A photograph of a pretty dark girl with long hair and a laughing mouth, and underneath, the caption: "*The mother who lost her baby*."

I felt a curious reluctance to read what followed.

"Mrs. Emma Marsh had been in the shop only a few minuts when she came out to where she had left her month-old baby asleep in the pram, to find that the baby had been stolen. Although the police were immediately informed, no trace of the baby or the person who stole her has so far been found. There has been no similar case in the neighborhood for some years. Police are of the opinion that the child was stolen by a woman who may be mentally unstable. Possibly someone unable to produce a baby of her own. Inquiries are still going forward, and it is hoped that the baby will be recovered and returned safely to her mother."

◆

The fountains mingle with the river;
And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things, by a law divine,
In one another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?

Percy Bysshe Shelley
Love's Philosophy

I stopped reading and stared at the paper in front of me. My name was Marsh, and this dark-haired laughing girl was my mother. The knowledge gave me a curious feeling of insecurity. I read through the account again and carefully wrote down both the name and address. Pushing the papers away, I continued to sit there, thinking of that dark-haired girl and the baby who was myself.

At Croydon Station, I had to wait for a train. It was nearly seven o'clock when I returned to my hotel. After dinner, I asked if they had a map of town, and when one was produced, I took it to my room to study. It was some time before I found, in small letters, the road I was looking for. I made a little plan of my own before returning the map to the hotel desk.

I slept little that night. For most of it I lay awake wondering what I should do if my mother answered the door to my knock, but I reminded myself how unlikely this was. Even in my most hopeful moments, I had never supposed my task would be as easy as that.

I reckoned that the road I wanted was about a mile from the hotel. I started soon after breakfast to walk there. With each step that took me nearer the more nervous I became. I kept going over in my mind what I would say if I saw her.

I need not have bothered. No. 26 was an Edwardian semi-detached house with flaking paint. The curtains were drab and the garden grew more weeds than flowers. I knocked at the door and realized that my hand was trembling.

A large woman with untidy gray hair opened the door.

"Does Mrs. Marsh still live here?"

"No, she doesn't. Hasn't lived here for years."

I turned away, conscious of quick relief. I said, "I'm sorry to have troubled you," and then, "I suppose you haven't any idea where she went to?"

The woman shook her head.

"None at all. I've only been here three years."

I was halfway down the path when she called after me.

"You might try Mrs. Ballantyne next door. She's been here a long time. She might know something."

I rang the bell next door but it was a long time before anyone came. Finally, bolts were drawn back and the door opened. A small, bent figure peered up at me nervously through thick spectacles.

I said at once, "Mrs. Ballantyne, your next-door neighbor thought you might

be able to tell me where Mrs. Marsh went when she left here."

For a second, she hesitated, then she threw open the door.

"Come inside, my dear. She moved a long time ago, but I think I've got the address somewhere. She wrote to me for some years after she left and she moved several times, but I'm sure I've got the address."

She led me into a room at the back of the house and told me to sit down, then went over to a desk in the corner, peering inside and turning over an untidy heap of papers. My heart sank. It would be a miracle if she could find anything amongst such a muddle, let alone an address from some years ago. While she scrabbled in the desk, she asked me if I were an old friend of the Marsh family. When I lied, "Yes," she turned to look at me.

"She was always a gay one, was Emma—dancing, theaters, anything for a bit of life. That's what she used to say."

The image of the dark-haired girl in the paper was beginning to fall into place and so far, I wasn't very thrilled with the emerging picture.

I asked, "What about her husband—was he gay too?"

The small figure by the desk gave a titter.

"Oh, dear me no, that was part of the trouble, I suppose. John liked a home life. He was much older than Emma, of course." Again she turned to look at me. "They were divorced, you know. Let me see, I think it was about a year after the baby was stolen. A sad case, that, but I suppose you know of it." She clucked her tongue. "Yes, a very sad business, baby stolen right from its pram. Yes, that's right, Emma moved away very soon after that. You'd think she'd have been broken-hearted, losing the baby, but she wasn't. Not Emma—too gay a girl for that."

"She left you an address then?" I prompted and she nodded.

"Yes, I'll find it in a minute. I know it's in here. Somewhere near London, I think it was."

But it was not until five minutes later that she pounced on an old envelope. Pulling out a sheet of paper, she handed it to me in triumph. The miracle had been accomplished.

The miracle which Mrs. Ballantyne had performed informed me that my mother had moved to Sutton, another Surrey town. Mrs. Ballantyne couldn't tell me if she had married again after the divorce, only that she had left my father for another man. I looked at the letter again. My mother was still using the name of Marsh at that time.

It was another hour before I was able to leave the house. The old lady seemed lonely and I hadn't the heart to refuse when she offered me a cup of coffee. I shamelessly plied her with questions about my mother, some of which she was able to answer, and when I left, I had a fairly clear idea of Emma Marsh's character.

I arrived in Sutton that same afternoon and found that the address I wanted was just south of the town. When I found the house, I stood staring at it, wondering about its occupants. It was fairly new, neo-Georgian, quite large with a circular drive leading to the front door. I rang the bell, and after a short interval, an elderly woman opened it.

"Does Mrs. Marsh live here?"

She looked surprised, then frowned. "Not *Mrs.* Marsh—Mr. Jason Marsh."

I pulled myself together quickly."I thought Mrs. Marsh was still here. Could I perhaps see Mr. Marsh?"

She looked at me a trifle suspiciously. "He's not here now. He's at business. He won't be in until about six this evening."

I said firmly, "Then I'll come back about half-past six. Will you please tell him to expect me then?"

Again, I saw that trace of suspicion. "Who shall I say will call?"

For a second, I hesitated. "Miss Carlion. He won't know my name, but if you will tell him that it's in connection with Mrs. Marsh, I'm sure he will see me."

I returned to the house just after half-past six, having spent most of the day trying to work out the relationship of this man to my mother. Had she and my father come together again? Had old Mrs. Ballantyne been mistaken in thinking there had been a divorce?

The same woman opened the door and ushered me into a room at the back of the house, which looked out onto a neat suburban garden. I was standing by the window when the door opened. I turned.

A young man stood there. He was of medium height, fair hair which curled around his ears, a rather square-jawed face, very bronzed from what could only have been foreign sun at this time of year and which made his gray eyes look too light for his face. He came forward into the room, holding out his hand.

"I'm sorry if I don't come up to expectations," he said, smiling, and I realized that I must have been staring.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be rude..." I shrugged helplessly. "It's just that I didn't know what to expect."

"No, I see that. Won't you sit down and what will you drink?"

I chose sherry, and while he went to fetch it I was conscious of feeling out of my depth. I had the sensation that whoever this man was, he was dominating this scene even before we had started talking. When he came back with the drinks, he said, "My housekeeper tells me that you were enquiring about Mrs. Marsh."

"Yes, I was given this address from the one she had near Reigate."

"That was quite a time ago."

That told me exactly nothing, but then, I hadn't told him much either.

He had a pleasant voice and now, he was smiling.

I said, "Your housekeeper tells me that she doesn't live here anymore."

Still smiling, he said, "You can't know very much about her if you thought she did." He waited, but when I didn't say anything, he continued, "I'm sorry. Mrs. Marsh is dead."

It was something I had never thought of, and it came as a complete shock. I knew he was watching me. I tried to pull myself together.

"She was a friend?" he asked.

"She was my mother."

There was dead silence while he stared at me. I hadn't meant to say that and instantly regretted it, especially when I saw his expression.

In the silence I could almost feel his thoughts chasing round his brain. Finally, he asked quietly, "*What* did you say?"

"Emma Marsh was my mother."

There was no backing out now. I had to go on from here. Again, a long silence.

"Then, that can mean only one thing."

"Yes."

"You'd better tell me."

But suddenly, I didn't want to. His voice was quiet, but there was something about the tone I didn't like. I began to feel that I hadn't played this scene at all well. I had stupidly told this man who I was without finding out where he fitted into the story, or even if he had the right to be told anything. I sat forward and put my glass on a small table near me.

I said firmly, "I don't know who *you* are."

He smiled. "I am Jason Marsh."

"I know *that*; your housekeeper told me that this morning. I mean, I don't know where you fit in—what relationship."

He took a long sip of his drink, his light gray eyes surveying me over the top of the glass which he finally set on the table beside me.

"It would appear from what you tell me, that I am your brother."

It hadn't occurred to me that my mother might have had another child.

"You don't seem pleased," he said dryly.

I asked quickly, "Are you?"

He gave a short laugh. "It's all rather sudden, isn't it? But I would not be so impolite as to behave as if I were displeased at the discovery of so charming a sister."

I felt as if he were making fun of me. The color rushed into my face. I stood up abruptly.

"There is no further reason for my visit. Since my mother is dead, there is nothing more for me to do."

He raised his brows as he too stood up. "What had you in mind to do? Had she been alive, I mean?"

There was a sudden tension which I found disconcerting.

"My father—" I hesitated, "I mean, Edward Carlion, when he was dying, asked me to find her. That was my only reason for coming."

Jason Marsh stared at me. "Perhaps he had some belated idea of recompense for her." I heard the cold bitterness in his voice.

I said, "I don't know. You see, I didn't know I was not his daughter until after he died."

He looked at me in disbelief. "Are you telling me that you knew nothing of your history?"

"I *didn't* know. Scarcely remember my—" I hesitated, struggling helplessly. "I mean, the woman I have always thought of as my mother but. . . "

The light gray eyes were suddenly cold. "Yet he knew that his wife had stolen you from another woman.—That *is* who you are—the stolen baby." I didn't answer and he said scornfully, "What kind of man could he be?"

I said slowly, "He was a good man. I can only say that through my knowledge of him, he must have had some very compelling reason to have allowed her to keep me."

It sounded a futile and silly excuse, and I couldn't expect him to understand something I didn't understand myself.

"That doesn't make it any better from your mother's point of view."

Suddenly I remembered Mrs. Ballantyne saying, "She was always a gay one, was Emma. You'd think she would be broken-hearted at losing her baby."

"*Was* she so upset? Was she so terribly broken-hearted at losing her baby?"

He glared at me angrily. "Wouldn't you expect her to be? Wouldn't any girl?"

I said slowly, "She might not have wanted a baby in the first place."

He took a step toward me, then stopped. "What are you saying?"

I met the angry light eyes with my own. "I mean that her marriage broke up so soon after I was born that she might not have wanted to be burdened with a baby to look after."

He made a gesture with both hands, as if he might be willing to consider such an idea, but he said coldly, "You seem to have an odd way of looking at things." He turned away, pointing to the chair I had left. "Why be in such a hurry to leave? I want to hear more about you—where you live, what you do."

I hesitated, anxious to leave, but he came to take my arm to lead me back to the chair I had left and, other than being outright rude, I could not refuse to take it. When I was settled, he fetched us both another drink.

"Now, tell me about you. After all, we *are* brother and sister, even if we are strangers."

◆

But love is such a mystery
I cannot find it out;
For when I think I'm best resolved,
I then am most in doubt.

Sir John Suckling
Love Is Such a Mystery

I began reluctantly, "I've lived most of my life in Corsica."

"*Corsica?* Is that where you were taken? No wonder the police could find no trace."

"My father—I mean, Edward Carlion—"

"Yes, yes—I know who you mean. There's less confusion if you refer to him like that. After all, you never knew your real father."

"My father owns—owned orange and olive groves on Corsica and—"

"Large groves?"

"Yes, about the largest on the island—certainly the best."

He nodded as if at some thought of his own, then said, "Well, go on."

"Edward Carlion's wife died before I was three years old and after that, until I went to school, I followed him 'round most of the time." I paused, gathering my thoughts. "After I left school, I helped my father run the estate. He taught me everything he knew himself."

There was a long silence during which those light gray eyes never left my face.

"And now? What happens now?"

"I shall continue to manage them."

"You can really do that?"

"Yes, I am quite capable of doing that." I smiled for the first time at his apparent surprise.

"It's a big job for a girl of your age."

I shrugged. "It's been my life for so long." Once more, I stood up.

"I am sorry that I shall never meet my real mother," I said a trifle stiffly, and then another thought struck me. "She never married again after her marriage broke up?"

He looked at me oddly, then smiled, saying slowly, "No, she never married again."

I don't know what made me ask, but I said, "Were you very fond of her?"

For the first time, those cold eyes softened and his whole manner changed.

"I was devoted to her. She was a—very happy person. Lively and fun to be with. Yes—we were close. I miss her."

"When did she die?"

"Nearly two years ago."

I didn't like to ask him how she died, and he didn't volunteer the information. I said, "I'm sorry," and moved toward the door.

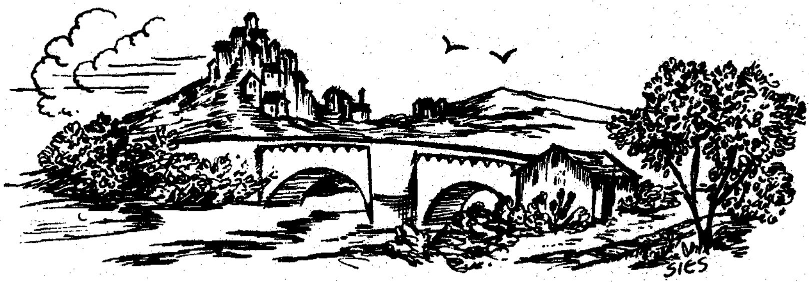
"You must give me your address before you leave. Now that we've met, it would be a pity to lose touch entirely."

It seemed such a perfectly reasonable request that I hesitated only a second before telling him, wondering swiftly why I had hesitated at all.

"How soon do you return to Corsica?"

"As soon as I can book a plane. I've done what I came to do, and I cannot be away very long."

Jason Marsh saw me to the door, saying he hoped we would meet again soon. I didn't second the wish, because I had discovered that I didn't like this man who was my brother. I didn't know why. It was just a general feeling of distrust for which I could not account.



My greatest wish at this time was to return to Corsica as soon as possible, but my unaccountable feeling of unease left me with the need to talk to somebody about the turn things had taken, but nobody except Marcus knew the true facts. Reluctantly, I decided to call on him at his office before leaving England.

On the phone he said, "Yes, of course, come. I'd no idea you were here."

I reached his office about midday, and he gave me quite a welcome. It seemed strange to see him in formal clothes surrounded by deed boxes and legal papers.

I said a trifle tentatively, "I don't want to take up too much of your time."

He smiled. "I've cancelled all appointments until three-thirty this afternoon. You should be flattered. I'll take you to lunch, then we can talk."

Quick relief flooded through me, a sensation which surprised me in connection with Marcus. He chose a quiet restaurant, and as soon as we had ordered, he demanded to be told all that had happened. He interrupted only once during the whole narration. By the time I had finished, we were having coffee, and he sat frowning down at his cup as he stirred the coffee.

"Is this man older than you?"

"I don't know. A bit difficult to tell, but Mrs. Ballantyne never mentioned there being another child, only that Emma Marsh was very gay and that she went out a lot when she got over the shock of the baby being stolen. No, I think he must have been born later. It looks, after all, as if she and her husband didn't part, after all."

He didn't answer, continuing to frown down at his cup. Finally, he said, "You don't have to see this chap again. You've done all you can." He looked up suddenly, "You didn't give him your address, did you?"

I nodded disconsolately. "I'm afraid so. He asked, and I didn't see any reason not to."

"Yet, you didn't trust him."

"I didn't *say* that."

"No, but you implied it."

"Anyway, there's nothing he can do. I don't suppose I'll hear any more of him."

I watched Marcus across the table. Obviously, he didn't share that opinion.

"You may be right, but if you do, you must let me know at once." His voice held the usual note of authority which, also as usual, drove me to resist him.

"Oh, don't worry. If I do hear from him, I shall know how to deal with it."

Without pause, he changed the subject abruptly.

"Thank you for your check. You were very prompt. I hope it didn't inconvenience you? I *have* written to you, but of course, to Corsica."

Soon after lunch, I left for the airport. His rather irritating parting words were, "If you get into difficulties, you know where I am."

I slipped easily into the routine of the groves; the weeks and months passed quickly because I was fully occupied. It was June almost before I realized.

Lise and I rode when I could spare the time, and I was not surprised when she wanted to know if and when Marcus would be returning to Corsica. I said that I didn't know. She volunteered that she thought him very attractive. "I suppose so."

She said with a laugh, "I don't expect you've noticed, as he is your brother."

"But he's—" I began, and pulled myself up sharply. In that moment I forgot that the myth still held on the island. I shrugged, trying to retrieve my mistake. "I was going to say, he's too tall. For most girls, that is."

"Well, I'm fairly tall myself," Lise said laughingly, "and I—*I've* no complaints. I only wish he'd come back. He's exciting."

I remembered the lipstick on Marcus' mouth. Evidently, the excitement had been mutual. Perhaps he would return this summer.

That night, I was coming up late from my office down by the groves and suddenly had the feeling of being watched. It was very dark, the trees dense with foliage, and I could see nothing as I stood still. Over to my right, I heard a slight movement as if someone had shifted a cautious foot.

"Who's there?"

I remained quite still, waiting. I could hear my own heartbeats. I, who had never been nervous, now was and it made me very angry.

I heard the crack of a twig and turned to face the sound, still conscious that someone watched me.

I thought I heard a low laugh, but the chattering of crickets was loud around me and I could have been mistaken. After a minute, someone walking moved quietly away, and finally it was silent except for the night sounds I loved. I walked on, conscious of being badly shaken. Shaken and puzzled. All my life I had walked around the estate at night without fear, but now—who could be there, waiting to frighten me? I didn't know, but everything in my life was changing so fast that I no longer felt that I could judge anything at all. I couldn't believe that any of the islanders would want to harm or to frighten me.

That night, I barely slept at all. I locked all the doors; Francine, watching me with a positively perplexed gaze, finally asked if anything was the matter. I assured her that I was all right. "Just a bit on edge," I said, and after a few more words with her, she seemed satisfied.

But I did notice, as I went to bed that night, that Mac appeared unusually high-strung.

I spent the rest of the week rather enjoyably, ending it with a visit to the market at Ile Rousse. I rarely got to the market anymore—that is Francine's domain. While I was there, I ran into Marie Kingston. We walked through the stalls, then found a shady spot on this tree-covered village square and sat down to have coffee. Our chat had mostly to do with the groves. I tried as discreetly as possible to inquire whether she knew of any visitors in our area, and, not suspecting anything, she shook her head, no, then continued with what she was saying. Marie is quite a talker.

She did mention that either she or Ric would be stopping by one of these evenings with the appropriate papers for me to sign: I had just got off the first installment on this loan I'd taken from them, and was terribly relieved to be able to begin repayment so soon.

I was therefore not terribly surprised about a week later, when returning to the villa after dark, I once more saw a shadowy figure waiting for me. This time I was not afraid for it was not only near the villa, but was most certainly Ric. The figure remained still as I approached. Perhaps he thought I hadn't seen him. I said, "Hullo, Ric. Marie said you might be stopping by one of these evenings."

There was no answer, and it was not until I was nearer that I realized that the man standing there so silently was not Ric. I said sharply, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

He stepped forward into a shaft of light from the villa.

Jason Marsh.

Suddenly, I recollected that eerie non-meeting among the trees the other night.

He said, "A little surprise for you. A pleasant one, I hope."

Thoughts were racing through my brain. My mind reeled at all the complications his arrival would cause. My careful decision to keep matters as they were could be blown sky high.

I said coldly, "Certainly a surprise."

We stood facing each other in darkness except for a lone shaft of light.

He moved sharply. "You don't sound very welcoming."

"Why should I? I didn't invite you."

He gave a short laugh. "That's true, of course, but if you remember, I did say that I hoped we would meet again."

I was suddenly aware of fear; that there was something here to be afraid of, I was sure. "Why have you come?"

He waved a hand in the direction of the patio. "Perhaps if you were kind enough to ask me in, we might be able to discuss the situation." His voice was heavily sarcastic.

"There is no situation to discuss," I answered him without moving, and it was at that moment that Mac made his appearance. He came silently and at great speed, growling menacingly. When he reached us, the effect on Jason was traumatic. Mac didn't touch him, only raised his great head to stare at him.

"Take that damned dog away." Jason's voice was several pitches higher than usual and I allowed myself to smile. Mac would not touch this man unless I told him to, but of course, Jason did not know that and he was obviously convinced that he was going to be attacked. I reassured Mac quietly, and he went to lie down a few paces behind me.

Jason pulled himself together. "I think you are making a mistake. As far as *I* am concerned, there *is* a situation to discuss, and I suggest that you would be most unwise not to do so."

I tried to see his expression, but he had moved away from the light of the villa, and we stood together in the darkness.

"What are you saying? What have you come to do?"

He spoke slowly, and the voice I had once thought to be pleasant was very clear. "Edward Carlion and his wife built up an elaborate myth over the years—the myth that you were their daughter. There has never been a hint of your true origins."

He stopped speaking, but I knew now what he had come to do. Perhaps it was as well that he could not see the hate and contempt in my face as I stared back at him. I was silent as I struggled to make some sense.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "you don't mind the truth being known here."

Jason followed me in, with Mac padding closely behind, then lying down just inside the doorway so that no one could leave without passing him. Even this told me a lot about his opinion of our visitor.

Jason looked around the room appraisingly. "You were lucky, weren't you?"

"Very."

He threw himself into a chair without being asked, saying in his pleasant voice, "A drink would be nice. Whisky, I think—neat."

Silently I poured and handed him a drink, then sat down as far away as possible. He drank, then set the glass down on a table beside him.

I asked, "How long have you been here?"

"At Ile Rousse? Nearly a week. It is really a delightful little town—I've enjoyed it."

We might have been discussing a friend's holiday.

I asked bluntly, "Why have you come?"

"You agree that you have—had an obligation to your mother?" He offered me a tight smile, holding out his glass for a refill. I gave him a very small one. "Well, it strikes me as not unreasonable that your brother might expect a share of the goodies which have accrued to you."

"Blackmail."

He moved a hand languidly. "My dear girl, what a horrible word—and entirely unnecessary. I certainly haven't come to extort money from you. It is merely a suggestion I have to make which, under the circumstances, may appeal to you."

"I can't think of any suggestion which you are likely to make that would have *any* appeal to me."

He smiled. "That is, of course, a pity. I have taken the trouble this last week to speak to a lot of people. They are more than willing to talk about Edward Carlion, the man who, it appears, is like a little god to them. I can well understand how much it must mean to you for the myth of his character to remain. It would be such a letdown for you if these people were to know what he was really like."

I was dealing from a weak hand; I decided to bluff. "You seem to have forgotten that Edward Carlion is no longer alive. You cannot hurt him now."

He laughed outright.

"His memory means nothing to you? Is that what you're saying? You don't care if there is an article in the local paper giving the full story of what happened? You don't care if his good name and that of his wife are smirched and these nice, simple people for whom he is supposed to have done so much see him for what he really was?" He paused, his eyes blazing with genuine anger. "Is that what you are telling me?"

Very deliberately I walked over to his chair and brought my hand with all my

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Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.

William Shakespeare
Hamlet

force across his face. At once, Mac rose, leaping across the room to stand menacingly beside me, waiting for my word to attack. I saw the sudden fear in Jason's eyes. My heart was beating wildly with rage and my hand stung from the smack I had dealt him. I stood there shaking.

After a moment, he said, "I didn't know I was dealing with a vixen."

"There are a lot of things you don't know—chiefly about Edward Carlion. To start with, you are not even fit to sit in his room. He never did a mean act in his life. He— "

I heard his snort of derision, and suddenly realized just how childish I was being.

"You wouldn't understand," I finished wearily.

He laughed. "You're right—I wouldn't.

One side of his face was scarlet with the marks of my finger, and there was a small cut on his lip where my ring must have caught it. I felt a vicious satisfaction when I saw what I had done.

He sat back, but as he moved, Mac growled. I saw the fear back in Jason's eyes, and that too, gave me satisfaction. His lack of courage went with his role of blackmailer.

After a moment he asked, "Well, what about it?"

"About what?"

"I told you I had a suggestion to make. I think you'd better hear it."

I shrugged carelessly. "I imagine you are going to tell me anyway."

He nodded. "That's right, I am." He lifted his empty glass. "How about another of these?"

I met his eyes stonily. "In view of the fact that you are proposing to blackmail me, I don't think I can afford it." I made no move to take the glass.

His light eyes flickered with rage, but he replaced the empty glass on the table.

"You are not in any position to show such childish animosity and, of course, this talk of blackmail is ridiculous."

"What name do you prefer?" I asked politely.

He pushed out his hand in a furious gesture. "I suppose you wouldn't argue the fact that *your* family owed *my* family something in the way of compensation." He paused, but I didn't answer. I knew only too well that in one way he was right, but whatever compensation was possible had been owed to my mother, and she was dead.

"After fairly extensive inquiries during my stay in Ile Rousse, I have a pretty good idea of what this estate brings in." He waved an expansive hand. "I'm not a greedy man, so I suggest quite a small annual payment—say five hundred pounds. I am sure that is a sum you would scarcely miss, and I am prepared to settle for that.

"Quite apart from anything else, we *are* brother and sister. I would be quite willing to advise you on the business side," he continued.

"I very much doubt if you even know the difference between an orange and an olive," I said witheringly.

"I shall be in Ile Rousse for another week or ten days. There is no reason for you to feel that you have to make a hurried decision."

"Are you habitually a blackmailer or is this a new departure for you?" He took a menacing step toward me. Immediately, Mac growled and Jason stopped in his tracks.

He shrugged. "Blackmail. It's a useful word. Easy as a label. Don't try me too far or I might really consider it. You see—"

"Why are you doing this? You have a good-sized house, a housekeeper—you appear to be at least comfortably off. You obviously don't need the money." I broke off, thinking aloud, "I imagine your reasons must be hate and spite which are, perhaps normal ones for this sort of thing."

"You could be right. Your mother—our mother—and I were very close. I vowed that if I ever had the chance I would—" He searched for the right word. "I would take revenge on the people who had stolen her baby."

I said, "But she is dead. Both women are dead."

He nodded, saying angrily, "It makes no difference; the facts are the same."

Contempt in my voice, I said, "A sort of vendetta—as the Corsicans used to know it. You have come to the right place if you want to extract that type of justice." I felt hatred toward this man, but at the same time, I knew that I feared him. There seemed something not quite normal about him. Suddenly, I wished that Marcus was here. An utterly useless wish—since he was just about as much against Edward Carlion as this man.

Jason smiled coldly. "Nothing so dramatic as a vendetta, I assure you. Merely a perfectly fair business arrangement, as I told you. And now, if you will control that wretched dog, I will leave you to consider which course you wish to take."

* * *

All's cold and grey without it.
They that have had it have slipped in and out of heaven.

Sir James Matthew Barrie
What Every Woman Knows
On Romance

I held Mac's collar, and Jason made his way to the door, turning as he reached it.

"I am staying at the Napoleon. I suggest you get in touch with me as soon as you make up your mind."

I heard him close the hall door, his steps receding down the drive, and still I stood beside Mac, who stared at me with puzzled eyes. I let go his collar and, kneeling beside him, leaned my face against his bony head. To show his sympathy, he leaned heavily against me. Once again, the thought came to me that Jason was not quite normal.

I lay awake most of that night trying to persuade myself that I was being entirely stupid in even considering Jason's ultimatum.

I suppose if I hadn't loved Edward Carlion so much, I should never have hesitated. I should merely have told Jason Marsh to get lost. I might still do that; I might have to if I couldn't afford to pay him five hundred a year to keep him quiet.

I spent the next morning going through all the figures at my disposal. Father had always insisted that there must be a margin for emergencies and any necessary improvements, and although the estate was one of the best on Corsica he had never accumulated much capital because of his commitments for the island itself. I decided that whatever happened, I would not make any reductions along those lines. So, what was I going to decide? I ran my fingers through my hair, realizing that my head was aching.

"What's the matter? You look worried. I thought we were going riding this morning. I've been waiting."

I looked up to see Lise standing just inside the office door.

"Oh, Lise—I *am* sorry—I completely forgot. I've been so busy I didn't realize what the time was."

She grinned suddenly.

"Must have been the young man from last night put it out of your mind."

I frowned, saying sharply, "What young man?"

"My dear girl—do you have so many visiting at night that you lose count?"

I shook my head, smiling, taking an extra second to think. "I know now who you mean. It was just that I had not placed him in the category of 'young man.' "

"Very definitely a young man," she said, "rather a handsome one, I thought—in fact I was quite envious."

She was still smiling as I said carelessly, "I'm afraid I didn't notice much. In any case, I don't go much for fair men."

She made a face. "I wonder at that when you are so dark yourself. I should have thought fair men might appeal to you."

I gave a sort laugh. "Not this one anyway. It was purely business connected with Marcus. How did you come across him?" I added, hoping to deflect her from the main issue.

"I was coming home, and he stopped his car halfway up the hill to ask the way." She paused. "As a matter of fact, I'd seen him in the Napoleon Hotel the day before, talking to a man in the bar. He was asking him about the estate then and I wondered what was on."

I stood up.

"Well, I told him I wasn't interested in selling, and it wasn't for sale anyway. Come on, if we're going to ride, we'd better go."

"I should think he was wild after coming all this way."

"I expect so," I said indifferently, only interested in the fact that she seemed satisfied with my explanation, but I knew that she was still curious all the same. She spent quite a lot of time at the bar of the Napoleon, meeting friends, mostly men, who lived in Ile Rousse. If she saw Jason again, I knew she would have no hesitation in speaking to him and finding out all she could about his business. It might be the beginning of complications, just the sort I was most anxious to avoid.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed at all that had happened to me in so short a time. I longed to be able to rturn to the quiet and happy life I had led for so many years. I changed the subject, and we spoke of other things but all the time I was aware of having only part of my attention on what was being said, and I was relieved when we returned home.

It was late in the afternoon when the thought struck me, and I was filled with momentary excitement. Suppose Jason was an impostor? But why should he be? I tried to fit what I knew into that idea, but found it didn't fit very well. My mother's name had been Emma Marsh. That much Mrs. Ballantyne had known. Jason's housekeeper, when I had asked for Mrs. Marsh, had shown no surprise at the name, merely said she wasn't there but that Mr. Marsh did live there. Wasn't that proof enough? Still, I sent a cablegram to Mrs. Ballantyne:

"Did Emma Marsh have a son? Are you certain she was divorced?"

Poor old Mrs. Ballantyne would think I had taken leave of my senses. Perhaps I had. She had seemed very sure about the divorce, but it was possible she had been mistaken.

Now I had to wait and I used that as an excuse to make no further decision about Jason's demands.

The answer to my cablegram came the next day:

"Emma Marsh had no son. She was definitely divorced."

I read it with a certain amount of excitement, and for the first few minutes I longed to confront Jason with the news, but I soon saw that this called for further thought. If Jason was not Emma's son, then whose son was he? And why was his name Marsh?

Then I remembered that Mrs. Ballantyne had said that Emma had left with another man. *That* left me with a possible half brother. A half brother with the name of Marsh, which didn't seem to make sense. Even if Emma hadn't married the man, surely his son would take his name. Unless for some reason Emma had wanted him to take her married name. Everything was becoming more complicated, and in any case, my hopes for being able to refute Jason's right to feelings of revenge grew weaker by the minute. The fact that he might only be a half brother made little difference. My heart sank.

I wished again that Marcus were here, which, in view of our previous relationship, seemed odd, but I needed someone to talk to about this. I felt very alone. I played with the idea of telling Ric and Marie, but quickly rejected it. I had to solve the problem alone.

That evening, the phone rang.

"You're taking a long time to decide."

Jason, of course. There was quite a long silence before I answered. "I am not in any hurry to decide," I answered cooly, "and I shall certainly not do so until you are due to return to England. If you remember, that was the arrangement *you* made."

"All right, if you want to play it the hard way, you can."

I heard the click as he returned the phone to its cradle and putting my own down, I realized that I was trembling.

The following day, I received another call—from England.

"Susan?"

I couldn't describe my feelings when I heard that voice, and nobody could have been more surprised at my reaction than myself.

"Oh, Marcus—I am so glad to hear you."

There was a long pause and I suddenly realized how foolish he must think me. I waited for a sarcastic reply, thinking he might say, "Surely, this can't be Susan?"

Instead, he said, "That's nice," and after another pause, "I'm coming out. Do you mind? I can stay in Ile Rousse if you'd rather."

"You mean—you're coming out?" I repeated ridiculously, and heard him laugh.

"That's what I said. You sound shocked."

"Shocked and delighted. When do I meet you?"

"Two-thirty tomorrow afternoon."

"Right! I'll be there."

It wasn't until I had put down the phone that I realized I hadn't asked him why he was coming again so soon. Somehow the reason didn't seem to matter, I was just conscious of tremendous relief that he would be here.

When I went to bed that night, I slept better than I had for months.

It was a perfect day when I set out for the airport and the scent of the maquis came warm from the hills which, still in shadow, were the color of purple grapes. The car was open and my hair blew free in the light breeze.

I arrived, as I might have known, much too early. It didn't matter. The airport is small and friendly, and I went outside to wait in the sun, knowing I should see Marcus' plane fly in. This time I had no difficulty in recognizing those heavy brows in the long lean face, and it gave me pleasure to see his expression lighten as he saw me.

Throwing his bag into the back of the car, he handed me a small box.

"I think that's right."

I took it wonderingly. "Right?" I repeated.

"Well, it's the one you always wear."

I stared at him in amazement. "Perfume?"

"Of course."

It seemed incredible. First, that he was actually doing something pleasant; second, that he should be aware of what scent I used.

I said humbly, "Thanks very much. It was clever of you to know."

Then, of course, he spoiled this nice little interlude by saying with a wave of the hand , "Look on it as part payment for my food and lodging," and immediately, I felt like hitting him though I quickly pulled myself together as he continued pleasantly, "London was dull and not too warm. This is glorious."

"Yes, I love it."

"I know."

Suddenly we were both embarrassed and I gave all my attention to driving until I asked, "Why did you decide to come?"

He waved an airy hand. "I'll tell you when we get back. It's too long a story for now, but tell me how *you've* been getting on."

"That's rather a long story, too. I think it had better wait, as well."

He looked at me sharply, but didn't ask any questions, and during the rest of the drive, we talked of the island generally.

When we arrived, Francine brought us tea on the patio. After I had handed him a cup, I said, "Now tell me."

"I've been doing a bit of snooping."

I looked at him quickly. "My mother?"

"Right back to the beginning, as far as I was able."

"How did you do it?"

"I employed an agent." He picked up his cup and drank, saying, "This is delicious."

"China."

"Really? I've never drunk it before."

"Oh, you must have."

He shook his head as if the point was of real importance. "No, I'm sure not. I should have remembered."

He put down his cup and I prompted him. "An agent?"

"Yes, a chap I've used before. He's pretty good—very reliable." He looked up at me. "Your mother didn't marry again but she kept pretty steady company with a man."

I nodded, thinking that this fitted with what I already knew.

"They seemed to be constantly moving."

"What did this man do?"

He gave a wide smile. "Swindle people mostly, as far as I can gather and the constant moves are accounted for by the fact that he didn't want the police to catch up with him."

"And did they?"

"Oh, yes, eventually—as a matter of fact, he's still in jail."

"She didn't do herself much good, did she?"

"No, except that there was a son. That man you met, Jason."

"He's here," I said.

"*Here?*" He gave me a sharp look.

"Yes, but finish your story first."

"Emma was devoted to this boy and he seems to have worshipped her. Perhaps because of his father's record. That's only an assumption, of course, but it seems reasonable. The boy, of course, was not *Emma's* son. He was about two years old when she joined up with his father."

"Not *Emma's*—then why is his name Marsh?"

"I understand that he changed his name legally at the time of his father's conviction."

I let out a sigh of pure relief to know that Jason Marsh was no relation of mine. I saw Marcus look at me oddly, but I said quickly, "Go on."

"It seems that, latterly, Jason, too, has become something of a slick operator. He has made quite a lot of money in various ways, and, to give him his due, he looked after Emma remarkably well. They lived very comfortably in the Sutton house you saw."

He handed me his cup for a refill saying, "This is good, I'll have some more."

The patio seemed very quiet while I poured the tea, my brain trying to adjust to this new angle.

"Emma had a coronary and died very suddenly. It appears that Jason went to pieces for a time—which means he must have been genuinely devoted to her." Stirring the fresh cup of tea, he added, "I think that's about all, really."

I sat silently when he stopped speaking. I needed a few minutes to consider what he told me. Jason's claim to a relationship had obviously been false, but that need not stop him from trying to blackmail me. I wondered, suddenly, why Marcus had chosen to come to Corsica instead of writing or phoning. There was nothing which could not have been said in a letter. I became conscious of being watched and looked up to find those dark eyes staring at me.

He said, "And now, let's have your news. You say that Jason Marsh is here? What reason had he for coming?"

"Blackmail."

Marcus sat up abruptly.

I wanted to remain cool while I told my tale and I tried to speak lightly. "He made—I mean, he allowed me to believe that he was my brother—that he had been born soon after Emma left her husband." I glanced at Marcus and saw that his brows were drawn down heavily.

"I told you to let me know if you heard any more from him."

I said helplessly, "I didn't even know he was on the island. He just turned up out of the blue."

I wasn't ready to discuss this aspect. I knew perfectly well what Marcus would think when I told him I had contemplated dealing with Jason. He threw out his hands in an exasperated gesture. "You've had time to let me know. You knew I'd come."

I felt astonished. I knew no such thing. It would never have occurred to me that he would be ready to come running at my beckoning but I wasn't going to argue the point now, so I let it go.

When I didn't answer, he said irritably, "Well, go on, what happened next?"

"He'd been asking questions in Ile Rousse, and he realized that everyone believed that I was Edward's daughter and you were my brother."

After a moment's thought, he said, "You don't mean that he thought that was sufficient grounds for blackmail?"

"Yes, why not?"

He shot me a look of genuine surprise.

"But it's not important anymore. It might make a bit of confusion at first, but that would soon die down."

I could feel my mouth setting into a tight line. "I suppose it means nothing to you if the whole story—and possibly a garbled version—appears in the local papers?"

"But why should it appear in the papers?"

"Because those were Jason's terms. If I didn't give him money, he was going to give the whole story to the press."

"I see." He paused. "Well, I hope you told him to go to hell." He rose from his chair, walking to the edge of the patio, presumably waiting for my reply and when I didn't answer, he turned sharply. "Didn't you?"

I shook my head and he stared angrily.

"Why not? You must be mad."

Suddenly, I felt miserable. I might have known that things between this man and myself could not remain happy for long.

I said wearily, "No, I'm not mad, but you wouldn't understand."

He went to sit down again, then said quietly, "What wouldn't I understand? I think you'd better explain."

I began a trifle wildly, "Of course, you never loved him. You never took the trouble to know him—"

I heard him sigh. The he said slowly, "I suppose it was an impossible situation for any man."

"And you think I'm mad for honoring his memory. Think what he did for the people here—think how they all loved him. Isn't that worth keeping?"

After a silence, he spoke quietly, "Yes, it's worth keeping, but not at the expense of blackmail. That's never the way to deal with anything."

"Then how?"

"We must find another way."

I found that "we" suddenly comforting. "But how? What other way is there?"

He sat frowning and silent, and I didn't disturb him. Finally, he rose and went to the phone, turning as he reached it.

"I told you that Jason Marsh had been a bit slick in some of his dealings. He certainly made a lot of money suspiciously quickly."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to ring my agent chap to see if he can pin anything definite on him. If he can, it will be all the leverage we need."

He made the call while I watched, noticing for the first time what a mobile face this man had. I couldn't hear the other end of the conversation, but, judging from Marcus' swiftly changing expressions, it seemed to be reasonably satisfactory.

Marcus came away from the phone with a wide and satisfied smile.

"Wilson seems to think that the mention of Hannible and Cummins will make him jump."

"In what context?"

"Drugs."

Suddenly I felt a wave of hope.

Marcus said, "How much did Jason ask?"

"Five hundred a year. He said I'd hardly notice that. He didn't want to be greedy."

Marcus whistled. "You have to hand it to him as regards nerves—particularly as she wasn't even his mother."

"I know, but he *was* genuinely fond of her. It was about the only nice thing about him." I paused. "What I don't understand is that he doesn't need the money. Do you know that I accused him of carrying on a sort of vendetta in the same way the Corsicans used to? *I'm* sure it is only revenge he wants, and if he can't achieve it this way, he will find something else he can do."

Marcus looked at me thoughtfully. "I suppose that's possible, but I think what Wilson has on him will keep him quiet for some time. He won't dare to stir up too much trouble."

"I hope you're right. What do you suggest I do?"

"Phone him and fix a time for him to come here."

"And then?"

Marcus spread his hands, smiling. "Then play it whatever way you want, but keep the name of Hannible and Cummins up your sleeve. When you refuse to give him the five hundred, he will threaten you with publication in the papers—and that is where you come into your own." He said it almost with relish and, involuntarily, I smiled.

I dialed the hotel number, and after a pause I was informed that Mr. Marsh was not in. Would I care to leave a message?

"Will you tell Mr. Marsh to be at the Eleanor Estate sharp at eleven a.m. tomorrow?"

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

I asked Marcus about his life in London, but he was as vague about it as he had been before. We were walking in the groves after dinner, and he kicked a stone from the path as he walked.

"My plans have altered since we saw each other."

"What *are* your plans?"

He walked on, and I followed behind on the narrow path.

"I have an appointment in Ile Rousse tomorrow afternoon."

For a second the significance of what he had said completely passed me by, then I exclaimed, *"Ile Rousse?"*

His voice floated back to me in the darkness.

"Let's say you sold Corsica to me the last time I was here."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Do you mean that you are *staying* here? On Corsica? You're going to *live* here?"

He stopped in his tracks, turning so abruptly that I collided with him and nearly fell. He caught me by the arms as I stumbled against him but even before I was steady, he let go, turning quickly to walk on, saying, "Yes, to all those questions, provided I can get what I want."

For some reason I felt a trifle shaken up, and it took me a moment to register what he had said.

"Provided you can get what you want? Well—what *do* you want?"

We were quite near the villa now, and I could see the lights as we walked toward it.

"I've been making inquiries about a firm in Ile Rousse—I expect you know them," and he gave their name. "I understand that they are very well thought of and they want an English partner."

"Yes, it's a good firm. M. André was a friend of Father's." I hesitated before saying, "But surely there would hardly be the same opportunities that there are in London."

"No. But a much more pleasant life."

We had reached the patio, and the light from the house fell on his face.

"Have you any objections?" he asked a trifle coldly.

"Objections? Of course not. Surely, the island is large enough to hold us both." I tried to smile.

After a moment he said, "That's what I thought," and stood aside for me to enter the villa. I mixed him a drink and crossed the room with it in my hand.

"I suppose you'll live at home?"

There seemed a long pause before he took the glass from me. "I'd thought of finding a flat in Ile Rousse."

"But this is your home."

He gave a derisive laugh. "Not anymore. I settled that question years ago. Or had you forgotten?"

"No. I hadn't forgotten." I moved my

hand. "I thought after today that was at an end. I thought we were making a fresh start."

"But I imagine you would scarcely want me living here."

I went back to the drinks tray, squirting some soda water into a glass. "I don't see why not. We shouldn't be in each other's way—the house is large enough, and it wouldn't be too far to drive each day."

"No, it wouldn't be too far to drive down," he agreed as if he were not thinking of what he was saying. Then he moved sharply. "Anyway, I've not even had the interview yet. Nothing may come of it."

"No, I suppose not." I heard myself say with a feeling of regret. In spite of the fact that I had been working very hard, I had to admit that I had been lonely. Returning to the villa each night, it seemed very empty and lonely, the only welcome, Mac's. Even if Marcus and I did not get on too well, it would be nice to find someone there in the evenings. Someone to talk to; someone to argue with. I looked up to find him watching me.

Again I felt those dark eyes on me. "You've missed him, haven't you?" His voice was gentle.

"So much."

He turned the glass in his hand, staring down at it.

"I'm beginning to wish I'd known him better."

"You never gave him a chance."

He shrugged. "Perhaps he never gave me one, either. He could have stopped me, come get me." He sounded like a little lost boy, and my heart went out to him.

He picked up a large paperweight from a table, stood staring at it as if it were of extreme importance. Then, he looked up, smiling. "If you think he was a good man, then, that's what he was."

I felt tears sting my eyes. "He *was* a good man—always thinking of other people and what he could do for them. He was a most unselfish man. You must forgive him."

"He built the hospital, didn't he? And didn't he give a sum each year for upkeep? What happens about that now?"

"I still do it. I want everything to be the same."

After a minute he asked, "You've plenty of money? I mean to run the estate as it should be run?"

I nodded but said nothing.

He shot me an exasperated glance. "Surely, there's no need for you to be so secretive. It's useless for you to think you can run this place unless you have the money to do it properly."

"You're quite right, and I assure you I should be the last person to attempt to do so. You seem to forget that Father and I ran it together for some years. I know as much about the business as he did."

He burst out laughing. "You're so prickly. Perhaps I shouldn't have let you buy me out so quickly."

I said coldly, "You wanted the money and you were entitled to it."

"Oh—you're *difficult*!" He threw out both hands. "What I want to know is, did it create a difficult situation for you?"

I shrugged, "Difficult, yes, I suppose so. A difficulty I was able to surmount, so there is no point in discussing it."

He came to stand in front of me. "What I am trying to say is, if you need it, you must have it back until you can arrange it more easily."

This man seemed capable of surprising me every minute. A very different man, this, from the one who was here before. For a fleeting moment I wondered if perhaps he, too, was glad that there was some sort of relationship between us.

"You needed it," was all I could say.

He let his eyes rest on me for a second then shrugged as if the argument was at an end.

"I don't want any of it back," I told him sharply. "That is your share and you are entitled to it."

He began to speak, stopped, then shrugged again. "As you wish." He walked to the door, turning as he reached it. "Don't forget your appointment in the morning. I'm going to bed now, goodnight."

He closed the door quietly behind him, leaving me with the distinct impression that I had been churlish and, no doubt, slightly foolish.

I had insisted on seeing Jason on my own. Marcus tried to dissuade me, but for some reason, it seemed important to me to do this on my own. We argued, as we did about most things, it seemed, but the only compromise I made was that Marcus could stay within earshot by sitting in the corner of the small terrace beyond the room in which I would receive Jason. Marcus and I were standing together when the bell rang punctually at eleven o'clock. I heard Francine cross the hall to the door. Marcus pressed my shoulder quickly before moving out to the terrace, saying, "Just remember—you hold all the aces."

Not from the whole wide world I chose thee,
Sweetheart, light of the land and the sea:
The wide, wide world could not enclose thee,
For thou art the whole wide world to me.

Richard Watson Gilder
Song

Jason entered the room with the pleased expression of a man who is about to get his own way.

"I'm glad to see that dog isn't here to welcome me," Jason said pleasantly, sitting down near enough to the open French window for Marcus to hear everything he said.

Francine brought in a coffee tray, setting it on a table near me. Jason raised his eyebrows as she left the room.

"Very civilized this morning. I'm glad to see that you feel you can afford to offer me coffee. Black, please, and no sugar."

I poured and handed him a cup before answering.

"Oh, yes, I can certainly afford to offer you coffee this morning. I could even afford a drink if you are here long enough."

He shot me a quick, frowning glance. "Why the sudden feeling of affluence?"

I shrugged. "Possibly because everything is on a surer footing now."

He nodded. "Interesting, no doubt, but let's get down to the reason I am here."

"By all means."

I took a few sips of my coffee while I waited for him to speak and was pleased to observe that my hand was entirely steady.

"Well," he started impatiently, "I hope you have decided to be sensible."

I smiled at him as I put down my cup. "Oh, yes, I have." I watched his smug expression.

"That's a good girl. I thought you would decide sensibly. So now—" he waved an expansive hand—"all we have to do is get down to business and decide how the money is going to be paid."

I met his gaze with limpid innocence. "What money?"

He stopped in the middle of pulling a notebook from his pocket, the smug expression suddenly wiped from his face. I began to be sorry that Marcus couldn't see him.

Jason said harshly, "Don't start playing silly games at this stage, just when we have got everything settled satisfactorily."

"Satisfactorily from whose point of view?" I asked politely.

With an effort at control he said, "Look here—I haven't time to waste. You asked me to come here to conclude our deal. I don't know what you are playing at now, I—"

"You *assumed* that was my reason for telling you to come."

He stared at me, his light gray eyes cold and angry. "Exactly what do you mean by that?"

I sat back comfortably in my chair. "It is very simple. I haven't the slightest intention of making any deal with you."

He was obviously so astonished that for a moment he didn't answer. I don't suppose it had even crossed his mind that I would refuse to agree to his demands. Finally, he said, "I refuse to believe that you could be so foolish."

"Believe what you like, but it is a fact that I am making no deals."

A look of cunning swept his face. "Then you can't have fully realized the alternative. Perhaps you didn't consider I was serious about giving your story to the papers."

I smiled. "Oh, yes, I fully realized your intentions were serious. You are, of course, just the sort of man to whom such an act would appeal. Only," I paused, "you are not going to do anything of the kind."

"You're kidding yourself," he said loudly.

"No. I've come into possession of quite a few facts since I saw you." I sat very still, watching him carefully, seeing the quick doubt, the suspicion deepen.

"I think you are being very foolish. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do," I answered as if I were speaking to a rather backward child. "Would you care for me to jog your memory?" Without waiting for him to reply, I continued. "It means going back a bit, of course, but there's no hurry."

He glared at me as I paused.

"To your birth, in fact."

He moved sharply but didn't interrupt.

"To start with, you are not my brother or my relation at all. You are the son of a father who is, at present, in jail. That, of course," I added, waving a hand, "is hardly your fault, though you seem to have inherited some of his failings. I understand that through moving frequently, he was for some time able to elude the police." I paused, looking at him appraisingly. "I can't feel somehow that the same luck will apply to you. Your mother," I conceded airily, "I know nothing about. She could, of course, be as honest as the day, but in any case, one criminal in the family is enough. Or usually enough," I added meaningly.

He mumbled something I didn't hear and I went sailing on.

"You yourself have had several short-lived and rather shady jobs, and it is only recently that you found one which suits you admirably." I looked across at him, then said with concern, "Let me give you some more coffee. You seem to have let that cup get cold."

He made a pushing motion with his hand as I started to leave my seat. "No more."

I settled myself comfortably again and waited. He sat looking down at his hands, perhaps trying to work out some way of thwarting me and my uncomfortable ideas.

At last, he spoke angrily. "I don't know where you've gotten hold of all this claptrap. It's quite ridiculous."

"From a very reliable source, I assure you," I said sedately.

"What proof have you of one word of this—this trumped-up tale? I never heard such nonsense."

"You still say that you are my brother?"

"I always thought of Emma as my mother," he answered after a pause.

"I am afraid those thoughts do not make you my brother."

He gestured irritably. "All right. I'll give you that. We are not brother and sister, but from the point of view of our proposed arrangement, it can make no difference."

"No difference at all. From the first, it was a straightforward deal of blackmail, not dependent on any relationship."

There was a silence during which he opened and closed his hands in a curious nervous gesture. "What do you want? What are you trying to do?"

"One of the things I am trying to do is to prove to you that blackmail is not quite the successful pastime you supposed."

Suddenly, he rallied and started to bluster. "You can't prove one word; there was nothing in writing. It would be your word against mine and with the story I have to tell, I know who they would listen to."

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, letting his voice blunder on while he tried to reassure himself that he was still in a strong position. Finally, he stopped and I opened my eyes. "Do the names Hannible and Cummins mean anything to you?"

Obviously, they did. He went almost green. I rose from my chair.

"I see that they do. I suggest you keep it in your mind every time you doubt what I say."

I moved toward the door, then turned as he slowly left his chair.

"The essential point for you to remember is that the moment an article appears in the paper, your description and whereabouts, together with full details of your activities, will be on their way to the police."

He stood uncertainly in the middle of the room, just staring at me.

"You would do that?" he asked hoarsely, as if, even now, he couldn't believe what had happened to him.

"I have all the details recorded so if you have any idea of removing me, it would be a waste of time."

He looked at me in genuine horror. "I'm not a murderer. I've never taken life. What made you say that?"

I nodded pleasantly. "Just a warning in case you wanted to begin such a career now."

He followed me into the hall, and I watched him go across the patio and out to his car.

I turned back into the hall to see Marcus standing in the doorway of the room I had just left. He was smiling widely.

"That was a terrific performance! You frightened the blighter to death."

It was the first mark of appreciation I had ever received from him. He made way for me to enter the room, and I sat down suddenly, feeling that I had come through a severe battle. Successfully, perhaps, but a battle nevertheless.

And then, he spoiled it. "I couldn't have done it better myself."

Without warning, I lost the temper I had been holding in so severely.

"Then what a pity you didn't take on the job," I said with the greatest possible unfairness.

Not unnaturally, he looked immensely surprised. "If you take the trouble to recollect, I tried to persuade you to let me do just that, but with your usual bloody independence you insisted on doing the job yourself. Don't start blaming me now."

His tone was icy but his eyes looked hurt as I turned toward him, already contrite.

* * *

There is only one kind of love,
but there are a thousand imitations.

Francois, Duc de La Rochefoucauld
Maxims

"I'm sorry, Marcus—that was rotten of me—I'm sorry," I repeated.

He only hesitated a moment before saying quietly, "I'm not surprised you were a bit upset after all that. You sounded very calm, but all the same, it must have been a strain."

I nodded. "Yes, I thought I was enjoying it at the time, but I seem to be a bit on the shady side now."

He looked at his watch. "Well—it's after midday, how about a drink?"

But while we drank, he spoke seriously.

"One thing worries me. I don't believe the fellow's sane. There's something odd about him, certainly. I thought so the first time I met him."

Marcus frowned. "If he himself has been on drugs, that may account for it. Anyway, I want you to be careful. Do you understand?" His voice held the old high-handed note, but somehow, it pleased me.

After lunch, I watched Marcus drive away to his interview, wondering again why he had changed his mind so abruptly about moving here. Surely there must be some other reason than the one he had given. I had some questions to ask myself too. Did I really want him here on Corsica all the time? Why on earth had I suggested him living here in the house? These were two questions which certainly needed answering.

The first was not too difficult. I had no close relations, and even if Marcus didn't qualify for that position, I *had* known him all my life. Further, he was a solicitor, which might prove useful. From what he had said, I didn't think he would object to his advice being asked from time to time if I were in difficulties. So, perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing for him to settle on the island.

The second question was a trifle more difficult, chiefly because I didn't feel I really knew the answer myself. That it had something to do with loneliness, I had no doubt, but it wasn't only that. Since we always seemed to be arguing, it was a little odd yet, perhaps just because of that, I found his presence exciting.

I came to the conclusion that I quite liked the idea and would be disappointed if it didn't come about.

I walked down to the office. Crops were going to be good this year and I know how that would have pleased Father. I was extra busy and worked with my usual concentration and was unaware that anyone had entered the office until a shadow fell across my desk. I looked up quickly to see the oddest expression on Marcus' face. Those black eyes held something which seemed very like affection.

"I'd no idea you were back. The interview was very quick, wasn't it?" I paused, suddenly apprehensive. "Oh, Marcus, wasn't it any good?"

He smiled. "You sound almost as if you would be sorry if it wasn't," he said on a surprised note, then looked a little smug. "As a matter of fact, it went very well. Indeed—very satisfactorily all round."

"Oh, Marcus—I'm so *pleased*—then you really are going to take it? It's all settled?"

"Except for all the legal parts—yes."

I looked at him a little doubtfully.

"And you're pleased? *Really* pleased, I mean? Without regrets? I mean, this is a big step to take."

He said, "Hark, the clucking hen."

Immediately I felt as if I had made a fool of myself and said stiffly, "Of course, it's nothing to do with me," and shifted some papers on my desk.

He pulled out a chair and sat down. "You misunderstand me." He frowned, hesitating. "I am unaccustomed to clucking hens. The experience was rather pleasant. You see, there's never been anyone to take an interest in what I've done before. I was touched that you cared enough."

I shrugged, accepting what he said a trifle ungraciously, saying, "Well, it *is* a big step, isn't it? I mean, it's so very different from what you intended. Suppose you hate it—you'll have lost the chance of some other partnership." I met his eyes across the desk and saw that they were smiling.

"No doubt there would be others, but I am not going to hate this. I am looking forward to it. We had a most friendly interview. M. André is an extremely nice man, and it appears that he has a great many English clients throughout the island, and this is why he requires an English partner."

"But I don't see why you changed your mind so suddenly," I persisted.

"No, I don't suppose you do," he said pleasantly and his eyes were still amused, "but I told you, didn't I, that you had succeeded in selling me on Corsica."

"Yes, I know, but—"

He levered his long frame out of the chair. "But you don't consider that reason enough."

I shook my head. "It doesn't seem like it."

He stood looking down at me, then nodded in an irritating manner. "You could be right, of course." He glanced at his watch. "Aren't you finished yet? It's pretty late, you know."

I looked at my own watch and was surprised to find how long I had been working. "All right. I'll come now and finish this after dinner."

"Must you? Can't it wait? You always seem to be working."

"You forget, I'm doing the work of two people now and—well—I didn't come into the office until quite late."

We walked slowly back to the villa, enjoying the scent of the maquis, which still lingered heavily in the evening air. The sun had begun to set, its red glow disappearing behind the mountains.

Our dinner was quiet and friendly, and we chatted about London and about Corsica. Again, his words assured me that he was delighted at the prospect of living here.

It wasn't until we had nearly finished dinner that Marcus referred to Jason Marsh.

"I am a bit concerned," he said, tentatively at first, "that this Marsh fellow might try something else."

"But what can he do?"

"Right now, I don't know," he said, "but it wouldn't surprise me if he did try something. He struck me as an awfully vindictive sort—the sort who doesn't always act rationally. The same way, I recall, as he struck you."

I had to agree, then added quickly, "But you'll be here now, anyway."

He sighed. "Well, I suppose that is precisely why I brought up the subject of Marsh. You see, I do have to go back to England to tie up my affairs there."

I was annoyed at the note of anxiety in my own voice when I asked him how long he would be away. He smiled, promising not to be gone "a moment longer than necessary."

After a leisurely coffee in the living room, I excused myself and went back down to the office to finish up my work. Marcus made a fuss about my going down alone until I again pointed out to him that I was very accustomed to doing just such a thing, and that I had been doing it for years.

While I was there, Ric Kingston stopped by, and after we talked about the groves for some time, he handed me the receipt on the first payment I'd made on the loan. I was becoming a bit embarrassed by the loan, and confessed as much to him.

"Now, now, Susan," he said in a terribly paternal tone, "you are not at all behind in repayment, and, believe me, I have the utmost confidence in your handling of the Carlion groves—I am positive you're not going to go bankrupt on me."

He laughed, and I couldn't help smile at my own nervousness. "Well, you see, Ric, it's just that I've never been a debtor before."

For some reason, I hesitated to tell him about Marcus moving to the island. Perhaps because he might tell Lise—the thought of that sparked an alien feeling in me, the feeling of something very much like jealousy. In any case, the Kingstons would be finding out soon enough, I thought.

It was quite late, and Ric offered to walk me part way to the house. When we were as far as the walk that leads to the patio and the French doors, he wished me good evening, thanking me again for the first payment, then kissed my forehead—so much as Father used to do—and turned back to the front drive and his car. As I walked to the patio, I was stung with a bite of nostalgia for Father, and fought to push it out of my mind.

When I entered the house, Marcus was waiting for me, standing rigidly in front of the French doors.

"Who's your boyfriend?" he said as soon as I'd stepped inside.

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. Then, I realized, he must have seen Ric Kingston walking me up from the office. I started to laugh. "Oh, Marcus, you *are* funny!"

For a second, he didn't move, then his face took on a stony look. He turned abruptly toward the door, but before he reached it, I said hurriedly. "He's not a boyfriend, for heaven's sake."

Marcus paused, turning toward me. Judging by his expression, I had merely made matters worse. The thick brows were down as far as they would go, and his eyes were narrowed angrily.

"And does Ric Kingston always come to visit you late at night when you're alone in the office?"

I was stunned. My first reaction was to ask him what business it was of his but the whole thing was so absurd, I could only stare. Finally I said, "Listen, the Kingstons are old friends. Ric is as old as Father was. I mean, good heavens, Marcus, make some sense!"

His brows remained in the dark V as he shifted his gaze from me to the rug between us. "Just tell me, why was he there? Did you have a rendezvous?"

Apparently, Marcus' life in London had been a lot more decadent than life here on the island. Rendezvous! Really. Which is precisely what I said to him. "Rendezvous? Really, Marcus!"

Unfinished Love Poem

by F. W. Manus

This is how it starts.
Paper teases pencil
pencil kisses paper
here there
laying it on the line.
If i leave it here
in the middle, half finished
it will leave you half-full
the way you left me,
it will leave you wanting more
it will leave you wanting
it will leave you
it will leave it will

◆

"Simply tell me what you were doing, meeting Mr.—Ric Kingston in the office tonight."

The combination of the hurt little boy and the irate young man before me was impossible.

I sighed and lowered myself into a chair. "I have some business dealings with the Kingstons," I said. "Ric stopped by tonight with some receipts—he'd just finished work himself. We don't keep your London nine-to-five hours here, you know."

"Receipts? What sort of business do you have with them?"

"It—it doesn't matter," I said wearily.

"Yes, yes it does."

I looked at his uncompromising expression and knew that it did matter to him.

"All right," I said, "all right."

I waited a few moments and told him what I had hoped I'd never have to tell him. "Very simply, when I bought out your quarter of the estate, I borrowed from Ric to do so."

"You *borrowed?*" he said, incredulously. He began pacing to and fro, made a move in my direction as though he were about to say something, and finally said, "How much?"

I told him, and a look of relief spread over his face. Then, not without a touch of his own embarrassment, he said, "I still have most of that cash, you know."

"No, I didn't know—I thought you needed it most desperately."

He smiled now. "Not as much as I thought. And," he said, "I'd like to buy back in—if I can."

I drove Marcus to the airport the next day. His check was in my pocket and he had made me promise I would pay off Ric as soon as possible. I drove back slowly, enjoying the beauty of the day. It was very hot but there was a pleasantly refreshing breeze blowing in from the sea.

I was just going out to the Kingstons' the following day with a check to pay back the loan in full, when the phone rang. I was astonished and not a little pleased to hear Marcus' voice.

"Why are you phoning?" I blurted out.

"To know how you are, for one thing. Have you heard any more from Jason?"

"No. Nothing. I should think he has gone home."

"I hope so. The other thing was to tell you that I hope to be back before the end of the month. A friend wants to take over my flat, which makes things easier, and everything else is working out well too."

I said I was glad and then there didn't seem anything further to say, but instead of ringing off, he said, "What have you been doing?"

"Working hard, there's a lot to do at this time of year."

"Are you coming back late at night?"

"Fairly late."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"But I've been doing it for years. It's perfectly safe."

"I don't want you to. Do you understand?"

I was silent for a moment, recognizing the high-handed note in his voice.

"Or—will you do it all the more because I ask you not to?"

His voice suddenly sounded cold.

I said, "No, but you're so bloody high-handed."

There was a second's pause, then he laughed. "That doesn't matter, as long as you do as I say."

Knowing he was teasing me now, I said, "Oh certainly, sir. I am always most obedient."

Again, he laughed. "Then, you won't?"

"All right, I won't." I knew my voice sounded grudging, yet, one corner of my mind registered pleasure that he cared enough to want me in one piece when he returned to Corsica. I thought I had misheard his next remark and asked him to repeat it.

"Have you missed me?"

I frowned. This was sheer arrogance but I said half laughing. "In an odd sort of way, I suppose I have."

"Well, odd is better than nothing," he answered cheerfully before saying good-bye.

I sat for a moment after he rang off, experiencing a new feeling of well-being.

I drove down to the Kingston's in the clouds, thinking of Marcus all the way. When I arrived, I had to force myself to keep my mind on business, but even so, after I handed them the check, I couldn't help say, "Marcus is going to be back—that is, he's returning to Corsica and the estate for good."

"Aha, so the boy's finally seen the light, has he?" Ric laughed.

"I think that's fabulous, dear," Marie said. "Having your family here with you to help run things—it's only right."

It occurred to me that soon we would have to tell them the truth about our relationship. But I avoided it for the moment by saying I had to get back to my office.

I was in the office and working when Lise appeared, leaning carelessly against the doorjamb.

"You never told me Marcus was here."

I looked up, surprised. "He only came for a short while, but he's coming back again. We must fix a party or something."

"He's coming back *again*? He seems to have a lot of spare time for toing and froing."

"It was a business trip," I said a trifle irritably.

Lise came into the room, perching on the corner of my desk. "I saw your boyfriend again."

I signed a letter with an angry flourish before answering. "I don't happen to have one."

She laughed. "Oh no, I remember now, you said he came up here on business. Anxious to buy the groves, didn't you say?"

There was something in her voice which I didn't like, but I kept my own quite steady. "Yes, and I told him that they were not for sale."

She had an irritating way of crimping up her mouth. She did it now. "It seems to have annoyed him."

"No doubt." I sounded cool but I no longer felt it, wondering what Jason had said, and to whom.

Lise looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Don't you want to know what he said?"

"No."

Disappointed, Lise tried again. "He seemed to know quite a lot about—" She hesitated. "About your family." Again, a pause. "Considering you say he only came to buy the estate."

Suddenly, I felt wary. I wanted to know just what Jason had said, but I certainly was not going to ask. "I wondered why he was interested when there was no chance of a sale. In any case, I suppose he has gone back to England now."

"Yes, he was leaving yesterday." She paused. "We had dinner together the night before he left."

I felt a stab of annoyance, certain that this was the beginning of trouble. The only thing of which I was certain was that if Jason *had* mentioned me to Lise, it would most certainly not be anything complimentary. She was watching me closely as I reached for a sheet of paper to roll into the typewriter.

"He claimed to have known your family before. Said he could tell me quite a lot about your mother." She paused, presumably hoping that I would show some curiosity. But I just finished rolling in the paper, pulling the carriage across in readiness to start a letter. My hands were poised above the keys.

Lise said, "It was rather odd, really, I mean the things he was hinting at."

I smiled at her. "It's astonishing to what depths people will descend when they're angry. They don't ever seem to bother about real facts." I shrugged. "He must have been more annoyed than I'd supposed at losing the sale of the estate."

Lise pushed herself off the desk. "Oh, well, I see you're busy so I'll go. I just thought you might like to know."

"Thanks, but no—not particularly."

After she left, I dropped my hands from the typewriter, thinking of what she had said.

I put my hands over my face. I had thought I was free, and now, here it was, starting again. Only, what was the point in Jason starting hints and rumors about me? The answer to that was quite simple. Sheer hate. That was his reason, and a dangerous one. Jason Marsh might have given up the idea of blackmail, but he was obviously determined to do me as much harm as possible without too much risk to himself. But, I reminded myself, he had now left the island. Surely it was unlikely that he would return. Perhaps this was just the sting in the tail. I decided to ignore it and with a determined effort, concentrated on my work.

It was nearly the end of the month when Marcus returned, and it was not until I was on my way to the airport that I realized how much I had missed him. Now I frankly admitted to myself that I was delighted he was coming back, this time, for good.

The plane was slightly late and I waited impatiently until at last he came, taller than the rest, his eyes searching for me.

"You're so brown that you look like a gypsy," was his greeting and I didn't know if it was a criticism or a compliment. Personally, I always thought a tan suited me, being dark, but you could never tell with Marcus.

I said, "There's been a lot of sun."

"There must have been to make you look like that."

"You make it sound like an accusation."

Here we were, arguing as usual, even before he had put his luggage in the car. He stopped, a case in each hand.

"Why an accusation?"

"Something unpleasant."

"Oh." He slung the cases in the back of the car then waited for me to get in before doing so himself. I pressed the starter, then he said in a totally unaccented voice, "I like it."

"Hmm. That's something."

He said mildly, "We don't have to quarrel about it, do we?"

"Certainly not. It's not important anyway."

"No. What have you been doing?"

"Ripening olives and oranges."

"Good crop?"

"Yes, particularly good. The weather

has been right all the time."

We continued to talk and then abruptly, Marcus asked me if I had heard any more from Jason.

"Only indirectly."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Lise met him once or twice in the Napoleon. He took her out to dinner."

"*Lise*?"

"Mmm. She thinks he's attractive." I negotiated a corner before adding, "Apparently, he told her that he had known my family before—said he could tell her a lot about my mother."

"Presumably, he meant *my* mother."

"I suppose so." I paused. "Lise said she thought the whole thing odd—all the things he was hinting at. She hoped to shake some sort of reaction out of me, I think."

"And did she?"

"No. Not really. When I didn't show any interest, Lise went away."

"Do you mean that Jason is still on the island?"

"No, he's gone now and I hope that's the end."

Marcus didn't offer an opinion about that, and we went on to discuss other things.

A short way from our gateway a car coming toward us slowed as it came level. Lise. She greeted Marcus effusively.

"I didn't know you were coming back quite so soon. We must fix up a meeting."

Marcus gave her a beaming smile. "Yes, that would be fun. I'll ring you."

I let in the clutch and we moved forward rather suddenly as I stole a glance at Marcus. He was smiling with a slightly maudlin look on his face. Noticing my glance, he said, "Let in the clutch rather suddenly, didn't you?"

Suddenly cross, I said, "Yes, my foot slipped."

We were in the drive now and he didn't pursue the subject but instead said how beautiful the garden looked.

I told him to mix drinks while I took some shopping out to Francine. When I came back, he was standing on the patio. He turned as he saw me. "It's good to be back."

"No regrets?"

"None."

"This will be an entirely different life. Quite different."

"Yes. Quite different. I hope."

"When do you start working?"

"Next week. My car is being shipped over. I hope it will be here by then."

"If not, have mine until it comes."

"That's very generous of you, but I don't want to be a nuisance. I've been thinking—perhaps it really would be better if I took an apartment in Ile Rousse."

I couldn't think what to say. The silence lasted so long that finally he broke it.

"Isn't that what you would really prefer?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No. No, I told you. This is *your* home—you *should* be here."

"That isn't really what I asked you. I don't want to know what you deem to be right. I am asking you what *you* really want."

I walked to the edge of the patio. Suddenly and unexpectedly overcome by ridiculous tears, I said, "Please stay."

He said quietly, "Thank you. If you are really sure, I'd like to."

"I'm really sure. I've put you in your old room, but if there is any other you'd rather have, just say."

I was talking to regain control, hoping he hadn't noticed my silly tears. Certainly, he showed no sign of having done so.

"Thanks, that will be fine. I think I'll go and unpack."

When he returned, he handed me a small box, saying in an off-hand way, "I noticed you wear earrings."

I opened the box to find delicate aquamarine drops—and he had also noticed that my ears were pierced.

"Oh, Marcus, they're lovely. Thank you, but you shouldn't have brought me anything."

He waved a hand. "Merely a peace offering," he assured me lightly, and I was conscious of sharp disappointment though I didn't quite know why. It was, I suppose because he managed to make me feel that he hadn't really wanted to give me anything. As he said, it was merely a peace offering. I was wearing a pale blue dress with which the earrings would match perfectly, and I went to a mirror to put them on. When I had done so, I admired them on me, turning this way and that to make them catch the light, at the same time, surreptitiously regarding myself to see if my tan really did as much for me as I'd supposed or if I merely looked like a gypsy.

I became conscious that Marcus was standing behind me, also peering into the mirror. We had gone out the patio and were chatting peaceably when Lise appeared. She had that look in her eye that spelled some sort of mischief. Then, when Marcus offered her tea, she said, "Tea would be marvelous, Marcus, but I thought you and I could take it in the village." She turned to me, a beaming smile on her face. "You won't mind sparing him a few moments, will you, Susan?"

Not that I had any time to object. They were gone in a flash, and all I heard was Marcus saying he'd be back at lunchtime.

When he did return, he was quite sober. I held myself back from asking him anything at all about his morning with Lise, but over lunch, it was he who broached the subject, in a way I hadn't expected at all.

"Lise knows," he said, eyeing me closely.

"What?"

"Jason told her that you are not my mother's child."

I nearly dropped my fork, and started trembling. "What did you say?"

"I told her that you were adopted when my mother's baby died."

I stared at him angrily. "Why did you do that? You had no right to. You never asked me. Why did you let me down?"

"I didn't let you down. I merely did what in the circumstances seemed the wisest thing to do." He paused. "If you will only think for a moment you will see that there was nothing else I could do." Before I could say anything, he continued quietly, "There is no question of the real story coming out. Lise knows nothing about that."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. I told Lise that after mother lost her baby, the doctors suggested that she adopt one."

"And you didn't mention anything else?"

For the first time, he showed anger. "Of course not. What's the matter with you? I told you, Lise will say nothing. Can't you trust me?"

I shrugged, but didn't answer. He pushed back his chair and stood up, looking down at me.

"I had no warning of what she was going to say. Besides—" He paused, standing there with his hands in his pockets.

"Besides what?"

The heavy brows came down, and for a moment he didn't answer. Then he said slowly, "Besides, there are other reasons."

I met his gaze squarely. "I can't think of any," I said coldly.

Suddenly, he smiled. "No, I'm sure you can't. Nevertheless, there are. You must believe that."

I looked at him standing there with a smug expression on his face. I said crossly, "Then you'd better tell me."

He shook his head. "Oh, no, I don't think so. Not yet."

I pushed back my chair and stood up.

"Really, you are the most irritating man I have ever met."

"Yes, perhaps," he said ruminatingly.

"Yes, perhaps what?" I asked angrily. "You aren't making sense."

His eyes met mine and I saw with annoyance that his held amusement.

"Yes, perhaps I *am* the most irritating man you have ever met. But then, you haven't met many. You've no idea how irritating some of them can be."

I swung angrily towards the door, knowing that he was teasing me but unable to take it. I said sharply, "If you can't talk sense, then don't talk at all," and swept out of the room. I went straight to the office, and about five minutes later saw the car pass slowly down the drive. I remembered that Marcus had told me that he was going to Ile Rousse to see M. André.

I worked on, driving out all thoughts but those connected with what I was doing. Suddenly, I became aware that the sun was no longer shining and, looking out of the window was surprised to see thick mist creeping in from the sea. It didn't happen often but when it did, the mist hung about for several hours.

I worked on for another hour before deciding to return to the villa.

I stood for a moment just outside the office and everything seemed morbidly silent. Except for the foghorns out at sea, the whole world seemed wrapped in silence. The clinging mist was thickening every minute. I was familiar with every inch of this territory, but within seconds I found my sense of direction reduced to nil and I had to glance back at the dim outline of the office before I could be sure which way I was facing. I stumbled over unseen objects on my way. Everything appeared eerie and unreal, vague outlines which had no substance. I was relieved when finally I reached the villa. The temperature had dropped several degrees. I closed the French windows because the mist was drifting into the room. Suddenly, I thought of Marcus. He was not used to these roads with sheer drops in many places. I hoped he would decide to stay in Ile Rousse. Perhaps he would ring and tell me so. Then I remembered how we had parted. No, he wouldn't ring.

* * *

Unless you can muse in a crowd all day
On the absent face that fixed you;
Unless you can love, as the angels may,
With the breadth of heaven betwixt you;
Unless you can dream that his faith is
fast,
Through behoving and unbehoving;
Unless you can die when the dream is
past–
Oh, never call it loving!

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
A Woman's Shortcomings.

* * *

I tried to occupy myself with writing some long overdue letters, but all through them ran the thought of that dangerous road blanketed in blinding mist and I sat there feeling sick with useless worry. Francine brought supper, anxious, too, because Marcus was not yet home. By eleven o'clock I had finished all the odd jobs I could think of. It was useless to wait any longer. He wouldn't come now. I crossed the hall to the stairs and was halfway up them when I heard a dull thud as if someone had fallen against the front door. I ran back to open it and as I did, Marcus fell into the hall in a heap and lay still.

I dropped to my knees beside him realizing that he was unconscious. There was a jagged cut on his forehead which was bleeding badly. I fled to fetch water and dressings. When I returned, breathless, he was sitting up, his head in his hands.

He said, "I only just made it."

"Don't talk. Just stay still while I try to stop this bleeding."

"Oh, is it bleeding?" he asked vaguely, but obediently stayed still while I dressed and bound the wound. He thanked me with an air of great politeness and struggled to stand up. Finally, with my help, we made it to the nearest armchair.

"I'm afraid I've broken my wrist, too," he said apologetically.

I crossed to the phone and called the doctor, who promised to come at once.

Marcus lay back with his eyes shut. The blood was already seeping through the bandage. He looked ghastly.

He said with an effort, "I'm sorry. I was a fool to drive back."

"Why did you?"

I could hear the exasperation in my own voice and knew it was due to anxiety. Marcus opened his eyes.

"I thought you might be worried."

"Oh, Marcus—really—you could have phoned me."

"I wanted to get home," he said simply and closed his eyes again. An hour later he was in bed and already feeling the effects of the sedative the doctor had given him.

I scarcely slept that night, not only because of my anxiety for Marcus, but on my own account, for I was horrified by the thing which had so unexpectedly happened to me. The impossible, the unthinkable, had happened. I was in love with Marcus.

Nothing else could account for the wild fear and desperation I had experienced in the hall that night. I had known in that moment of realization that if Marcus was going to die, I would not want to live. It was something vivid and clear that I could not doubt. I was in love and, if I was right about Lise, there was no future in it. I allowed myself to remember small incidents when Marcus seemed changed toward me. I recollected his back-handed compliments, his concern for me over Jason. I remembered the scent and the earrings. I moved impatiently. This was merely wishful thinking. Better to face the fact that, at best, Marcus was only becoming mildly fond of me in a very ordinary way.

For the next few days, I worked hard in the office, glad that Marcus was now in the hospital and that for the moment, we didn't have to meet. When Marie came to tell me that Lise had been to visit Marcus, she also told me that he would be leaving the hospital the following day and Lise was driving him home. I thanked her and we sat chatting for some time, talking of Marcus' lucky escape and about the estate.

Lise brought Marcus home about six o'clock the next day. She took his arm as he got out of the car as if he needed help, which I could see he didn't. He sat in his usual chair. He looked extremely pale and as if he were in pain. I brought Lise a drink and asked Marcus what he would have, but before he could answer, Lise spoke for him.

"Oh, Marcus, darling, I don't think you should. Alcohol is bad after an accident."

He frowned as he said quickly, "Nonsense, I could do with a drink—I'll have my usual."

"Oh, Marcus—you shouldn't. I'm sure it isn't good for you yet."

"My dear girl, the accident was days ago and the doctors would have told me to lay off if it was necessary." There was obvious irritation in his voice.

Lise shrugged sullenly as I brought him his drink. Soon after, she left. We talked quietly until dinner, and soon after that, he agreed to go to bed.

At the door he hesitated. "I wonder if you could help me with my shirt and jacket? I can manage the rest, but those are a bit difficult with the plastered wrist."

"Yes, of course."

In his room, he stood while I unbuttoned his jacket, then his shirt, being extremely careful not to touch him as I removed them. Hanging them over a chair, I went to fetch his pajama jacket and helped him into it, fumbling as I did up the buttons, cursing myself for behaving like a shy schoolgirl.

"I don't think you have undressed many men," he said with his usual ability to discomfort me.

"No, but I've no doubt I'll soon get used to it during the next few days," I told him dryly and he laughed.

"Anyway, many thanks," he said as I replaced the sling for his wrist.

Lisa took Marcus out in her car most mornings, treating him rather like a frail piece of china, and I wondered how he could stand it. I kept away from him as much as possible, working all day in the office. Once, he commented on it and I felt surprise that he had noticed. He came down to the office to meet me, saying as I came out, "I see so little of you now. We only seem to meet at meals. I wanted to tell you that the doctor says I'll be well enough to work next week and M. André suggested that I stay with them until I am mobile again."

Curiously, I felt only relief. I was feeling the strain of living in the house with a man with whom I was in love, but whose interests appeared to be in a different direction. My future wasn't looking too rosy. In fact, the only bright prospect was record crops of both oranges and olives, which made my finances better than I'd supposed.

The following week I drove Marcus down to M. André's house just outside Ile Rousse. He was given an enthusiastic welcome. When I left, Marcus came out to the car with me. He said, "Don't come up late from the office on your own."

"But there's no reason not to now—Jason's no longer here."

He gestured impatiently. "It's too early to assume that Jason has finished his antics. I don't trust him."

"But he knows what will happen if he goes to the papers now and—"

"I don't think he will try that, but there are other ways in which he could get at you."

"I can't think he will bother anymore. It would mean he would have to come over again. Besides, what sort of thing could he do?"

"I don't know, and in any case, I could be wrong, but keep it in your mind and take care." For a second a smile touched his lips. "I don't want to come home and find you've done something silly."

It was so typical to end up with something like that, that I didn't comment, merely started the car and drove away.

Two days later, I received the letter, typed and posted in Bastia. It was quite short and unsigned.

"Edward Carlion has always been thought of as a benefactor on the island, always associated with good works, adored by the locals. What will they think when they know that all those years he was living a lie? That you are not his daughter, or hers either? You are parading round with the name Carlion when you have no right to it. How will you like it when everyone knows your story?"

That was all, but it was enough for me to know that Marcus had been right in thinking that Jason had not finished with his troublemaking. And he was still on Corsica. What could he really do to harm me? He had tried to harm me through Lise, and for some reason, Marcus seemed to think it not a bad thing, though I failed to see why. I longed to discuss this new threat with Marcus but he wasn't here. I could ring him up, but I was reluctant to do so. With his interest in Lise, I felt very much on my own, and I had no intention of leaning on him. I must deal with this myself.

I considered the letter again. Surely, if Jason was on Corsica, he would be in Ile Rousse. Suddenly I was convinced that he was in England and had got someone on the island to post it for him. On the strength of this idea, I decided to write to him in England. I composed the letter carefully.

"I received your letter today, posted in Bastia. I can only assure you once again that I meant exactly what I said when you were here and you would be wise not to contemplate any threats against me."

I added nothing more except my signature and posted it at once. It was nearly a week before I received a reply:

Dear Susan,

I was surprised to receive a letter from you after our last unhappy meeting. I was rather confused by the contents. I have not been on Corsica since that time and so find your accusations curious. You did not tell me the contents of this letter you say you received from Bastia, but I gather it must have contained some sort of threat to frighten you, in which case, I am not the only one to know your history.

Yours,
Jason

A cautious letter calculated to cause as much worry as possible.

There was nothing I could do but wait. If there was someone else on Corsica who knew my history and hated me, they would not have waited until now to try to harm me. I wondered briefly if the letters could be anything to do with Lise, dismissing the idea almost as soon as it formed. I was merely allowing jealousy to cloud my common sense. No, Jason was responsible, and the knowledge brought anxiety.

I tried not to let it worry me but inevitably it did and, when a few days later I came up from the office to see a strange car in the drive, I immediately thought of Jason. As I opened the door of the room I used, I saw his tall figure waiting.

"Marcus." I could hear the pleasure in my own voice and realized the foolishness of showing it so openly. He grinned and came forward, both hands outstretched—I thought for me to take, but saw in time that he was showing me that the plaster was off.

"See? I am free again. I can drive now."

"It's really all right? And your head?"

He shrugged. "Just an occasional headache, and I have to have treatment for my wrist."

"But, do you *feel* fit?"

The dark eyes searched my face carefully. "Yes, I feel fit, but why the considerate inquiry when you never came to see me?"

Feeling confused, I said hastily, "But Marcus, you were better when you left. You were well enough to work."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "It doesn't matter."

I knew that I had hurt him, but I could hardly tell him that my neglect had been deliberate. I risked saying now, "Anyway, I'm delighted that you're back."

He turned sharply to face me. "That sounded as if you meant it."

"Idiot. Of course I meant it. It's been pretty dull all on my own."

He smiled a trifle smugly, then asked me if I had any news. I told him about the letters. Frowning, he asked what I had done.

"I wrote to him in England, advising him not to threaten me."

One eyebrow raised, he inquired, "Was that wise?"

I crossed to the desk and gave him Jason's letters, which he read carefully.

"Yes, it was only necessary for him to know someone in Bastia. I think these are carefully calculated to worry you."

I moved impatiently. "Why can't he leave it alone?"

"Several reasons, I think. I think he hates you because you got the better of him over the blackmailing episode. And two, I think he has an obsession about your mother. And perhaps—most important of all—he knows you are in possession of facts about him, which—"

◆

Oh Love! young Love! bound in thy rosy
band,
Let sage or cynic prattle as he will,
These hours, and only these, redeem Life's
years of ill.

George Gordon, Lord Byron
Childe Harold

"But, surely, in that case, the sooner he leaves me alone, the less likely I am to harm *him*."

Marcus' eyes rested on me a moment before he spoke. "Not if he is out to harm you personally."

I stared at him. "But—where's the sense?"

"Sense is the last thing to look for. I am sure he is not entirely sane. The chap I had working on him said he was very much mixed up with drugs and is known to have taken them himself. That alone doesn't make for a very sane outlook."

Suddenly I was afraid and needed to reassure myself.

"Well, he isn't on the island now." I tried to speak lightly, but the thought of Jason made me jittery.

Make Believe

By Mahi Hardin

You are make believe
You are childhood dreams
Embodiment of what I once knew to be true
Nearly lost in the years that have passed by
In your face I see the hopes
Fairy tales
Wishful fantasies
Almost forgotten
Until now
You are everything I once believed in
Now your eyes tell me I can believe again

◆

Marcus said, "I don't want to frighten you, but after this, I think you must take more care."

"In what way?"

He shrugged impatiently. "That's just it—I can't tell you. All you can do is to be *aware*, and do try to remember *not* to walk about the estate by yourself."

After dinner, I thought he would be flying off to see Lise, but instead, he wanted to wander in the groves in the last of the light.

I said suddenly, "I don't think I could ever live anywhere else."

"You love it so much?"

"Yes. Surely no other place is as beautiful as this."

He turned to look at me but because of the failing light, I could not see his expression as he said, "You are quite happy to stay here then? You've never thought of leaving?"

"No, never."

He laughed suddenly, "What would you do if you fell in love with a man who had a job in England?"

I said shortly, "I am not likely to do anything of the kind." Then, to change the subject, I asked him why he now thought Jason was insane enough to return to Corsica.

"While I was in London, the chap who was investigating for me told me that Jason's father was not merely a criminal but that he is criminally insane."

I said with some bitterness, "My poor mother—she didn't deserve that."

Marcus shrugged. "She chose it."

"No. She didn't choose that."

"She chose to break her marriage."

"But surely she didn't deserve that even if she did leave her husband."

He said harshly, "Perhaps not, but marriage is for life."

This was a side of Marcus I hadn't seen before and I turned to look at him. He was frowning, then he said, "Perhaps you don't agree?"

"Of course, I agree, but don't you admit there might be circumstances in a marriage which might make it impossible to continue?"

"Of course, that's possible. That is why it is so important to be entirely sure before taking such a step. It is," he finished didactically, "why so many marriages fail."

I agreed whole-heartedly and was aware that he was watching me as we reached the villa, but he said nothing more; yet I allowed my imagination to run a little wild. Why had he spoken like this if he were contemplating marrying someone else? There didn't seem much point.

Suddenly I felt exasperation at the direction my thoughts were taking and wishing him a hurried good night, I went quickly into the house.

For the next three days, I revelled in having Marcus back, aware that his presence put a strain on me, but aware too, that the pleasure outweighed the disadvantage. Three evenings running he had stayed home and not even mentioned Lise.

It had turned warm again and we were having coffee on the patio. Far below us, the distant sea gleamed in the moonlight. I heard the melodious notes of a shepherd's pipe as he called his sheep.

Marcus said lazily, "A lovely sound."

"You're beginning to *feel* Corsica, aren't you?"

"Mmm. I think I must be."

"I'm so glad."

We were interrupted by the telephone and Marcus jumped up to answer it.

I didn't mean to listen but after a

moment, I heard him say, "Thanks for letting me know, Lise. It was good of you. We can only hope it will be all right."

With the best will in the world, I couldn't help speculating on the conversation; but when after a few minutes Marcus returned, pouring himself more coffee, he offered no comment, I refrained from asking any questions. Whatever the phone call was, it seemed to have changed his mood.

Mac was, as usual, lying beside me. He thumped his tail in appreciation of Marcus' return.

"He's certainly accepted you," I said as Marcus bent to stroke him.

"Yes, I'm glad. Do you take him with you when you go to the office?"

"Not as a rule. Not unless he follows me down, and then he doesn't stay long."

After a silence, Marcus said quietly, "I'd like you to take him with you."

For a second, I didn't realize why he was saying it, then a shudder ran down my spine. "You mean because of Jason?"

"Well—it's an easy precaution."

Suddenly I understood the phone call. "Is he on the island? Did Lise tell you?"

"Yes. She saw him in Ile Rousse today."

"Did she speak to him?"

"Yes, and she said he seemed odd. Wild was the word she used." He paused. "So please, keep Mac with you."

It seemed that I had misjudged Lise. It had been good of her to warn Marcus that Jason was back.

The next morning, Mac came with me to the office, rather grudgingly consenting to stay with me until I returned to the villa at lunchtime. As we arrived, the phone bell rang. I picked up the receiver to hear Marcus.

"You're all right?"

"Yes, thanks. I kept my promise and took Mac and he's been with me all the morning."

"Good, take him with you this afternoon."

The afternoon passed uneventfully with poor Mac bored stiff and unable to understand why I should suddenly want to ban him from his usual happy occupations.

Once again, Marcus stayed home in the evening, and belatedly it struck me that he was acting as watchdog. I had obviously been kidding myself that he had been finding my company pleasant. Although I knew that I should be grateful for his care of me, the fact that he was doing it merely from a sense of duty did nothing to add to my evening.

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What's the earth
With all its art, verse, music, worth—
Compared with love, found, gained, and
kept?

Robert Browning
Dis Aliter Visum

The next day, after Marcus had left for Ile Rousse, I reached the office and saw that the lock had been forced. I stood staring at it, conscious of sudden sharp fear. I called Mac to me and opened the door cautiously.

At first, I didn't see him. He was sitting over in the corner in the only comfortable chair the office possessed. He said good morning in his pleasant voice, as if this were an ordinary call. I just stood there staring, aware that Mac was leaning hard against me, growling under his breath. I put my hand on his head saying, "Wait," and he stopped growling but didn't move.

"Why have you come?"

Jason flapped a hand. "Just a little chat."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"But I have plenty to say to you—and it would pay you to listen."

I could see the wildness in his eyes. His face seemed to have changed. He looked drawn and ill. It wasn't hard to believe that he was mentally unbalanced.

"I don't want to talk to you." I hoped that the fear I was experiencing hadn't come through in my voice, but when he laughed, that hope died.

"You're frightened, aren't you?"

I said quickly, "I haven't any need to be frightened."

He laughed again, and it wasn't a pleasant sound, not even a normal one. I considered in that moment turning and walking out of the office. I could have done it and it was something Jason must have known, but this was the enemy and I needed to be sure what I was up against, so I stayed. Mac hadn't moved and I could feel his muscles taut against me. I took hold of his collar and he glanced up briefly. I didn't need his help yet, but I was glad to know it was there when I did.

Jason was saying, "I always like to play fair with my—" He hesitated. "With my enemies, so I have come to warn you."

"We don't need to be enemies," I said quickly. "You can go your way, I can go mine. We don't need to meet again."

"I told you, I came to warn you." He moved forward in his chair, and Mac nearly pulled clear of me.

I said, "Wait," and he was still again. The moment had not come. I knew that I could not hold him if he really decided to go.

"To warn me of what? Are you threatening me again?"

He shrugged. "Call it what you like but I want you to know that I haven't finished with you yet. There's a lot more to come." He licked his lips. "There's a lot more to come," he repeated, almost drooling over the words, and now I knew that he was insane. "*You* can pay for what your so-called mother did to Emma."

I must have been very stupid because in that moment I had the idea that I might be able to reason with him. "But don't you see, none of this is my fault," I pointed out and he leered at me.

"But you accepted responsibility when you tried to find Emma."

I said firmly, "I owe you nothing. In any case, Emma was not all that upset."

I should have known that was the last thing I should have said. He stood up abruptly, reaching me before Mac could move. He swung his arm at me and as he did so, Mac flew, setting his teeth silently in the flesh of Jason's bare arm and pulling him to the ground while he still hung on to his arm.

Jason yelled. He was not only in severe pain, but he was crazy with fear as well. Mac's eyes were on me, but I was not in any hurry to call him off. I looked at Jason as he lay with one arm up to cover his face.

I said coldly, "Perhaps that will prove to you that it will not pay to keep up this ridiculous feud. I have done nothing to you that you should continue to persecute me, and if you clear out now and never come near me again I will do nothing which could ruin you. And don't forget," I added clearly, "it is in my power to do that at any moment."

I turned to the door and, when I reached it, called Mac who came with puzzled reluctance, following me slowly to the villa, stopping once to look toward the office regretfully, obviously worried because he had been made to leave his quarry unattended. When we reached the villa, I flopped into the nearest chair, annoyed to find that I was shaking all over.

I waited an hour, then returned to the office with Mac beside me. The door was open, and even before I entered I could see that the whole place was wrecked, but the important thing as far as I was concerned was, Jason was no longer there. As I worked, putting everything straight, I wondered if this would be enough to satisfy his hate but had little hope that it would. Jason was not normal, and I didn't know what to do next.

Later, at the villa, I heard Marcus come into the hall as I came down the stairs. He said, "Hello," cheerfully, then took a second look at me.

"What's happened?"

I reached the hall and asked, "Does it show so clearly?"

He strode across to me, putting his arm across my shoulders.

"Oh Susan, Susan, what am I going to do with you?"

His voice and his behavior were so unlike himself that for a moment I felt confused.

"It's all right."

He shook me slightly. "But what happened?"

"Jason."

His hand dropped to my waist and he propelled me into the nearest room.

"Sit down and tell me."

He placed me carefully in a chair, rather as though I might break. This was an entirely new Marcus and I was determined to make this unusual mood last as long as possible. I told him all that had happened.

He remained silent throughout, and when I asked tentatively, "Do you think it is finished?" he turned sharply to stare at me.

"No. Of course it isn't finished. You surely don't think he'll leave off now when he got the worst of the encounter."

"Oh, Marcus, what will he do next? He's as mad as a hatter. I saw it today. I saw it in his eyes."

Marcus walked away up the room, turned, and came back to me.

"I don't know, Susan. I wish I did. The only thing of which I am sure is that whatever he's planning, he'll carry out soon. Hate like his has to be constantly fed." Suddenly he smiled down at me. "Poor little Susan, you don't deserve this."

In that moment, his voice was gentle, as his arm had been round me in the hall. If it hadn't been for Lise, I could almost have believed that it was me with whom he was in love.

The next instant, he had moved away, and I heard him phoning. He was gone a long time. When he returned, he held drinks in his hand and gave me one.

"I've phoned the hotels in Ile Rousse. He's not staying there. I thought he might have gone back to the Napoleon."

"And if he had?"

He looked surprised. "I would have tackled him, of course."

"But this isn't really your fight," I reminded him, and for a few seconds he looked angry.

"Are you telling me to mind my own business?"

"I am reminding you that you don't *have* to do anything, but at the same time—" I paused, smiling at him. "I am so grateful that you are here and I shall be glad of your help if I need it."

He stared at me, then burst out laughing. "That's the first sensible decision I've heard you make since this started. You can rely on me to do the best I can."

I held up my glass. "Thanks. Here's to our success as a team."

That night, I fell asleep at once and it was much later when I was roused from a dream by someone shaking me. It took me a moment to realize that it was Marcus. I sat up sharply, snapping on the bedside lamp.

He said urgently, "The groves are on fire."

Not properly awake, I looked at him stupidly. "But, they can't be!"

He said impatiently, "Hurry and dress and follow me down. I've told Mario, and he's gone to organize as many men as he can. Hurry!" he repeated as he ran out of the room.

By now, I was wide awake and shooting out of bed. I rushed to pull on slacks and sweater and boots. As soon as I was out of the house, I could smell the smoke and in another second, could see the flames licking up from the farthest groves down the slopes. The night was dark with no moon, but I ran fast through the familiar pathways not knowing what I should do when I reached the fire. All summer it had been hot and dry and everything was like tinder, added to which there was a slight breeze which was driving the flames toward the lowest groves. The October rains were due, but it was too much to hope that a miracle would be performed for me tonight.

Some of the men lived nearby, and now I could hear their voices as they strove to control the flames. They were using the irrigation system as best they could, but it would be totally inadequate for putting out the fire. Already some of them were attempting to beat at the flames with anything solid within reach.

I looked round for Marcus but could not see him, then I heard the sound of chopping from further up the slope. Realizing what he must be doing, I ran to one of the tool sheds, found an axe, and went to join him in his efforts to make a break between the trees to stop the fire from spreading to the top trees. When I reached him, he was wielding an axe, and wood was flying all around him. He said breathlessly, "I'm sorry but it's the only way to save the rest."

"I know."

I started just beyond him. Although I

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No man ever forgot the visitation of
that power to his heart and brain,
which created all things anew;
which was the dawn in him of
music, poetry and art;
which made the face of nature
radiant with purple light,
the morning and the night varied
enchantments;
when he became all eye when one was
present,
and all memory when one was gone.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Essays, First Series: Love

hadn't half his power, my father had taught me how to use an axe, and at least I could be some help. We both worked frantically and silently. Suddenly conscious of more glare, I lifted my head and saw that fresh flames had started.

"The swine's started another fire," Marcus yelled.

"You mean *Jason*? Jason did this?"

"Of course. Didn't you realize?"

It simply had not occurred to me, and now a cold horror spread through me. I looked around while I paused for breath. There was more wind now, and in spite of the men's efforts, the fire was gaining ground, licking its way deeper among the trees. From where we were, the heat and smoke were already distressing.

We slogged on for several more minutes, and now what we were doing was enough to make some sort of break.

The roar of the flames from below drowned out all other sound, and neither of us heard Jason approach until he was nearly on us. Marcus turned a fraction later than I, too late to avoid the blow that Jason was aiming with the heavy spade he was carrying. I saw the glint of the weapon in the light from the flames when it was in mid-air. Completely without thought, I lunged at him with my axe, hitting him on the arm and deflecting his murderous aim. The spade hit Marcus on the arm instead of the head. Jason turned on me like a maniac and although his right arm now seemed useless, he rushed to seize the axe away from me. All I could do before he reached me was to swing it wildly round, an action which met with more success than I had dared to hope. It caught Jason on the knees and sent him sprawling. Before he could move, Marcus was on him, his knee on his chest, his hands at his throat.

It was at that moment that I realized that we were being trapped by fire. The wind had changed sufficiently to enable it to catch tinder-dry wood in all directions. We were standing in the small clearing that Marcus and I had hacked out but both ends of that clearing were now blazing. I glanced wildly round.

"Marcus! We're trapped!"

He didn't hear, wholly concentrated on dealing with Jason. I bent to shake his arm.

"Marcus—we have to get out. We're being trapped!"

He glanced up, and in the light of the flames, his eyes looked like those of a drunken man. Again, I shook him. "Come on, we have to get through."

He stood up, for a second hesitating, then bent to the man on the ground.

"Get up!"

Jason struggled to stand but only reached his knees before collapsing. Marcus said sharply, "Take his other arm."

I hesitated only for a second before obeying. We staggered along with his almost dead weight between us, flames licking all round us. I felt as if my lungs were bursting from the smoke.

I heard Marcus gasp, "Hang on, we're nearly out. I think we can make it."

At that moment, I tripped and fell into a mass of burning branches. For the first few seconds, I was entirely oblivious of pain, then I screamed as flames licked up. Marcus scooped me up in his arms and staggered on. The pain now was almost too great to bear, added to which my lungs didn't seem to be working anymore but suddenly, miraculously, we were clear of the fire.

I remember Marcus lowering me onto the ground and collapsing beside me, then nothing else until I heard his voice saying the most unlikely things and felt his hands touch my face with the utmost gentleness; then, suddenly, Marie kneeling beside me, saying, "Her pulse is strong. She will be all right. We must get her to hospital. You, too."

I remember the doctor giving me an injection and the pain receding to bearable proportions. The injection must have been pretty strong, because my next recollection is waking in hospital, once more aware of pain and being told that I had missed a whole day. My arms lay stiffly on the bed, bandaged from shoulder to wrist, and my hair felt odd; most of it seemed to be missing. I thought of Marcus and tried to sit up, which brought a nurse to my side.

I asked, "How is he?"

She knew who I meant and said at once with a smile, "Not as bad as you."

"Can I see him?"

"Not yet. He is still in a lot of pain, as you are, and the doctors won't let him move around at present."

Soon after that, there was another injection and then, oblivion. The next time I awoke, I asked about Jason and was told that he was dead. Two of the men had tried to rescue him, but he was dead when they reached him. I wondered if I should be sorry, but could feel nothing for him.

I asked for a mirror and gazed in horror at my uneven tufts of hair. A nurse suggested that I have it cut even shorter so it could curl.

The hairdresser was sent for; I felt better when I saw what he had done.

I began to worry about the estate. I knew everything was insured, but that did not alter the length of time it would take to get established again.

Marie visited me and told me that Ric was doing everything he could to help, dealing with as many difficulties as possible. I was genuinely grateful.

In between my many visitors, I lay thinking back to that ghastly night with all its tragedy. Most of all I thought of the words I must have imagined Marcus had said, that and the feel of his hands on my face. Could I have imagined that, too? Or had it really happened? Or, because of the pain, had I conjured up the whole thing in my mind?

When the nurse came to ask if I would like to see Marcus, I determined to meet him as if nothing of the kind had ever happened.

The knock on my door sent my heart scuttering. He opened it, standing just inside the room, looking across to my chair.

"Hmmm. They told me they'd cut it."

"Well, you haven't any brows to scowl with, either," which was true, for they had been burned off. It gave him rather a rakish look which suited him. He had no dressings as far as I could see but I noticed that he moved very stiffly. I asked, "How are the burns?"

He glanced at my still bandaged arms. "Not as bad as yours, I imagine."

"Oh, Marcus, it was so terrible. We were so lucky to get out alive. I know you carried me out—thank you for saving my life."

Shutting the door, he came further into the room. "Talking of saving lives, I doubt if I should have been there to carry you if you hadn't wielded your axe so efficiently."

Suddenly, I shivered, remembering how I had felt when I had seen Jason's own axe raised above Marcus.

He changed the subject abruptly.

"They're letting me go home tomorrow. What do you want me to do?"

For the next few minutes, we discussed the estate.

"I hope to be home soon myself, as soon as these wretched dressings can come off."

"Poor little Susan."

I didn't look at him.

Prowling the room, he asked, "You don't mind me going home? I mean, I could quite easily stay in Ile Rousse if it is inconvenient."

"I'm quite sure Francine would like to have you all to herself to cosset."

"Cosset. What a lovely word. I don't think I have ever been cosseted."

"No? Well, make the most of it while

the chance is there."

"The implication being that when you return, it will stop?"

I paused refore replying, "I suppose that would depend."

"On what, may I ask?"

Before I could reply, my door opened and Lise poked her head in.

"Can I come in? I went to your room, Marcus, and they told me you were here."

He turned to her in what seemed to my hopeful wishes irritation, but he set a chair for her and took one himself. I listened to her prattle, reminding myself that although she had primarily come to visit Marcus, she certainly would have taken the trouble to come and see me as well.

Practically all her conversation was directed at Marcus, and I was conscious of a coming wave of depression. I couldn't help feeling that her arrival had interrupted something I would have liked to continue. Although Marcus had been only half serious, there had been something in his manner which surely had never been there before.

I caught him looking at me and realized that I had allowed my attention to wander. I made an effort to appear normal but I was relieved when she stood up, saying that she would be at the hospital the following morning at about ten o'clock to drive Marcus home. He followed her out, turning at the door to tell me that he would look in before leaving the next day.

I lay back, tired and dispirited. Had I been wrong in thinking that Marcus had seemed different? Had I read too much into his "poor little Susan"? If only Lise hadn't turned up.

In one way, I was dreading returning to the villa, for I would have to see the devastation which Jason's wickedness had caused. The whole of my life would be lying there in ashes and blackened roots. Although Marcus had said the trees near the house were saved, all the younger ones on the lower slopes had been destroyed. The crop to which I had pinned my faith would be practically non-existent. I was worrying in a most unconstructive manner, wondering if it was worth starting all over again.

It was nearly another week before I was discharged from hospital. Marcus fetched me on his way from the office. He had called in each day to see me, sitting quietly relaxed, telling me how kind everyone was being. Not once did Lise come into the conversation, for which I was relieved.

Marcus drove slowly up the long, winding road. I stared around me as if I were seeing it for the first time. The evening was warm and clear, the sea calmly blue far below. I seemed suddenly conscious of every stone, every blade of grass, every shadow. I had been so near death, and now I was alive again.

Beside me Marcus, almost as if he knew my thoughts, said, "It makes you aware, doesn't it?"

"Coming back, you mean?"

"Mmmm. When I came back, I looked at everything as if I'd never seen it before."

It was an unusual speech for Marcus and I said, "We were both pretty near death."

"Yes. Near enough to appreciate how precious life is."

We sat silently after that until we reached the villa, with Francine rushing out to meet us.

"Now it will be good.Now that you are back," Francine said, nodding comfortingly as Marcus returned to the car for my case. "He, you see, is lonely without you—he cannot settle—always he is restless. Now it will be all right."

I asked quickly, "But didn't he go out in the evenings?"

She shook her head, throwing out her hands in an expressive gesture. "No, no, never did he go out. Always he would stay here, but restless, you understand —not settling to anything."

It was news to me and gave me an odd feeling of pleasure. He came in, setting my case on the floor.

"I am saying," Francine told him with a beaming smile, "that you are restless without her—that you are lonely—that now she is home, it will be all right again."

I watched Marcus as he searched for a suitable reply, feeling slightly amused at the discomfiture I knew he would be feeling.

Smiling at Francine, he said, "Mac will be pleased, too." He bent to pick up my case again. "I'll just take this up to your room, then we'll have a drink to celebrate."

I took my drink out to the patio where it was still light enough to see the distant devastation of the groves. Those nearest the villa were untouched but of those below, little remained. I looked at it sadly. Could it ever recover?

"I think it looks worse from here." Marcus had come to stand beside me.

"I looks as if nothing will ever grow there again. It will be difficult to know where to start."

"My dear girl—a start has already been made. You've no idea what has been going on while you were away."

At dinner, we talked of his new partnership.

"It was certainly unfortunate that I was dumped into hospital almost before I'd started, but M. André took it in his stride and was most kind."

"You think it will work out well?"

"Yes, I'm certain that it will."

The evening had turned a trifle chilly, and when we had coffee, Marcus closed the French windows, afterward standing by them, his coffee cup in his hand.

Abruptly, he turned towards me. "That night—how much do you remember?"

I was quite unprepared for such a question and took so long to answer it that he asked again, "How much?"

I said carefully, "I remember falling, the branches burning me. I remember seeing Jason on the ground." I paused, not looking at him. "And you—I remember you lifting me. The pain—oh, Marcus—the pain was dreadful."

"And that is all? Is that all you remember? What did you hear?"

My heart missed a beat. I kept my voice low as if somehow that would give him an excuse to refute it if he needed an excuse. "I heard you. I felt your hands on my face."

Very deliberately, Marcus put down the coffee cup on the table, but he came no nearer to me and I couldn't tell the expression of his eyes because he was looking down. After what seemed a long time, he asked, "Did you mind?"

It seemed a very odd question, yet so typical of Marcus that, involuntarily, I smiled. "Mind? How could I mind hearing those words, or feeling your hands on my face—with love?" I ended almost breathlessly, my heart beating in my throat, feeling I was making a hopeless fool of myself.

"With love? Did you feel that?"

"And if you didn't imagine it—what then?"

Everything flooded into my mind at once then, all the thoughts jumbled together, the thought that he wouldn't taunt me like this, that he actually *wanted* me to say that I believed it, that the silly fool didn't seem to have any idea that I loved him.

"Oh, Marcus, you idiot."

His head came up sharply and his eyes met mine. I heard his breath go in a long sigh.

He said, "You? You too?"

I thought suddenly that if this was a love scene, it was the oddest I had ever heard of, yet I had no quarrel with it. It seemed to be heading in the right direction. I said crossly, "Yes, of course. I've spent weeks trying not to show it."

He came across to me, laughter in his eyes, taking my face between his hands, and they had the same feel as they had had the night of the fire.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

And that was a remark which out Marcussed Marcus.

"*Tell* you? How could I *tell* you? You and Lise—"

"What nonsense—there's never been anything between Lise and me, and she knew it. Come—we're wasting time."

His arms came around me, his mouth on mine and the next few minutes were hard to believe.

When I was free. I asked, "But when—I mean when did you begin—"

"I knew the first day you met me at the airport. I was by no means pleased and flatly refused to admit it—but that is when I knew."

I digested that carefully. "But you didn't know I—" I began indignantly, and he smiled in his usual superior manner.

"Oh, I fully intended to persuade you of my charms. Sooner or later," he finished more modestly. "You see, I intended working on it."

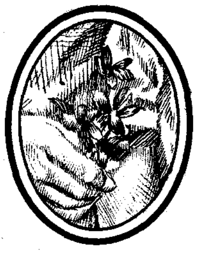
"You are always so refreshingly honest. I like that."

I went to the window, and now there was a great moon, free of clouds, throwing the groves into shimmering life. Far below, the burned trees stood out starkly from the rest. An hour ago the sight would have filled me with deep depression. Now, it seemed relatively unimportant. Only the man who now came to stand behind me was important. He folded his arms about me and I leaned against him. Suddenly serious, he turned me to face him, tilting my face up until he could kiss me very gently.

"This is not an end but a beginning. We can do it together. We can make it even better than before."

As I listened to these words, I knew that they were true and exulted in the thought that the future was here in the moonlight. A future not only for my beloved orange groves, but for Marcus and me as well.

A Bouquet of Violets



(Continued from page 27)

his fingers touching the wet, corn-bright hair. His face moved toward hers, and I heard her strangled protests, all the while seeing her reach up for him, drawing his mouth down to hers.

I rolled back again and cried soundlessly into the strong, acrid hay, until I eventually heard the barn door close.

I hardly slept that night, and Marnie took my temperature next morning, wondering if she should send for the doctor. I was glad of my heated forehead and red eyes, utilizing them fully to feign illness so that I shouldn't have to face the normalities of a day, shouldn't have to face dear, unsuspecting Amos.

I went downstairs after lunch and found that he was already ensconced in the parlor, seated in a straight-backed chair and beside himself with delight that at last some progress was being made. He hugged me and said that he just had to get better now that Ethan was leaving.

"Leaving?" I cried, and was appalled at my lack of control. I tried again. "Ethan is leaving?"

Amos drew on his pipe. "So I hear. A fickle lot these itinerant workers. It's a case of the grass always being greener, Gilly."

I nodded in absent agreement and wandered into the kitchen. Marnie was doing the dishes and she turned to smile at me. She had the same preoccupied look she'd worn on my first day there. I took a tea towel from the huge fire fender and went to the sink.

"Ethan is going?" I asked.

She nodded brightly. "Yes, he's got some commitment on the other side of the valley. But Amos will be well enough soon."

Her eyes strayed to the violets. They were already fading, losing their color, their brightness. Like Marnie's eyes, I thought, looking up at her and seeing the blatant despair. I wondered if life would ever be the same again for any of us.

Ethan left the next day. Amos shook hands with him and paid him the necessary wages, and Marnie walked into the kitchen with him to give him the packed lunch she'd prepared. I made myself scarce and shot up to my room. A little while later, I watched him walking down the mossy, rutted drive, his back straight, his dark curly hair romantic and heart-stopping in the sunshine.

I didn't go downstairs until the afternoon when Marnie was baking. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright—she said because of the oven heat—and I noticed that the little glass jar was full of fresh, dew-washed violets. Ethan's last gift to her.

I had many more holidays at Netherton, and slowly rediscovered a rapport between Marnie and myself. I was always aware of her desperate devotion to Amos, over-fussing, over-caring, as though she was dictating and living out her own penance. That night in the barn was my own dark secret. But gradually, as with everything, time healed, erased memories, made me forget. . . .

I wander through the grassy knoll, such a short distance from Netherton. My cigarette is spent, as are my thoughts, leaving me exhausted, enervated. I glance at my watch and see that I have already lingered too long, and quickly I flick a comb through my hair and see to my face. Marnie had always made such a fuss about such things.

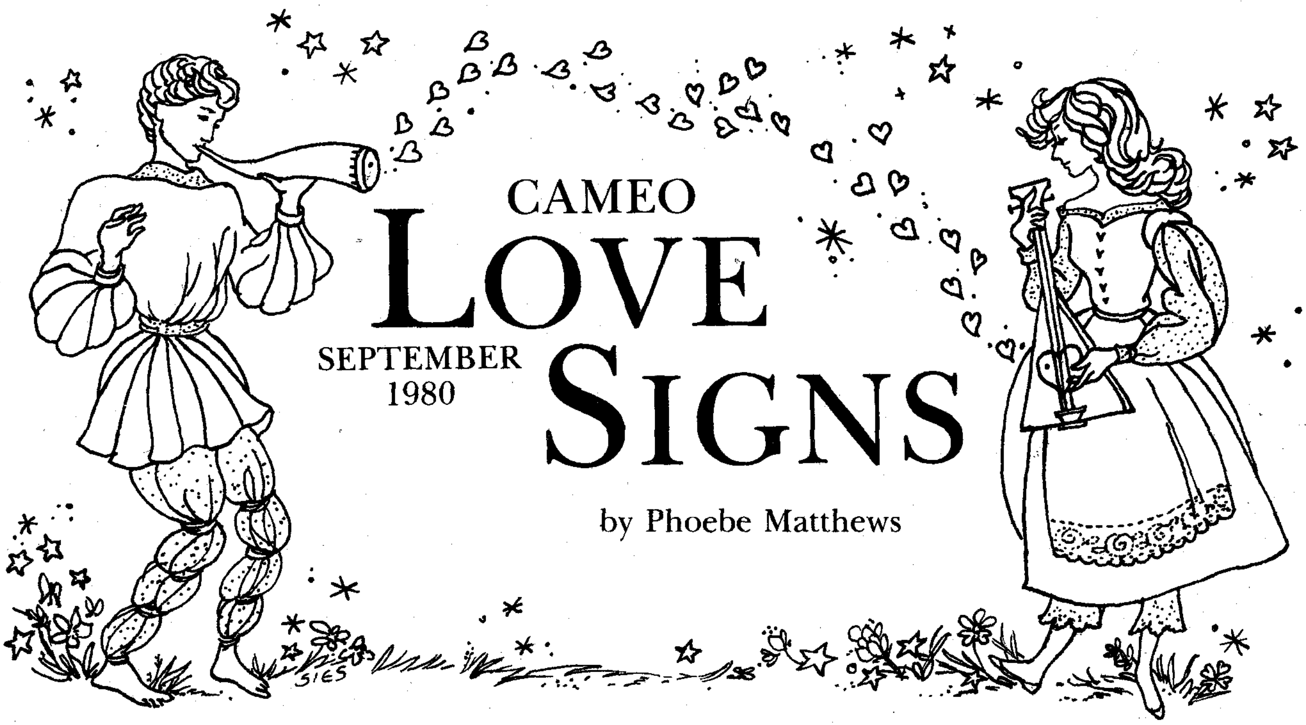
The service is short and simple, and the Vicar speaks of all the right things; about her devotion to Amos and to duty, her good standing in the community. One of the old school, he calls her, a fast disappearing race.

Amos is magnificent, and stands straight and tall like one of his beloved oaks. He kisses me and holds me in gentle silence. We walk together to the graveside and I hold his hand as the coffin is lowered. And in the strong morning sunshine, I see with a sense of shock the bunch of violets, dew-fresh and delicate, like a fairy offering next to the substantial wreaths and sprays of roses.

Amos looks at me and his soft blue eyes hold mine.

"I felt I had to. We had such happiness together. But I knew of the dark times, Gilly. And I'm just telling her that I've understood all these years."

I am overwhelmed by the generous, giving heart of this simple, extraordinary man, and I can no longer see his face as I reach up to kiss him. For my tears have started at last.



CAMEO LOVE SIGNS

SEPTEMBER 1980

by Phoebe Matthews

VIRGO
AUG. 23-SEPT. 22

While the golden September sun warms your sign this month, use your winsome Virgo charms to postpone those decisions that could turn your life's path from your heart's goals. Even now, loving Venus moves to bring you help through a friend, drawing strength from memories or past relationships that will reach out to you after the 18th. Messages encouraging you towards new pursuits require careful thought, lest the fiery passions of Mars tempt you to misplay your usual caution. A promise of love beckons from your future, so while you wait luxuriate in the brilliant marigold shades of color that so beautifully reflect the brightness of your personality. *Romantic days: 6, 9, 19.*

LIBRA
SEPT. 23-OCT. 23

While the energy of Mars encourages your delightful Libra creativity towards new sources of fortune, you may use its fire to bring desirable changes in your destiny. Again and again, like a familiar musical refrain, vibrations from old loves and past romances reach out to you and dazzle with their bright September spell. Compassionate Venus now surrounds you with the faithful devotion of loving friends, but keep your heart securely hidden around the 21st when an undesirable passion tempts you towards a dragon's lair of romantic sorrows. Tie a lover's knot of autumn cornflower's loyal blue in your lovely tresses as a reminder. *Romantic days: 4, 11, 25.*

SCORPIO
OCT. 24-NOV. 21

Imprudent and passionate Mars blazes through your sign, gathering all your Scorpio willfulness and glamour until you outshine the sunflowers and become irresistible to those you most desire to spin into the fabric of your future. Wise words from a gentleman who moves ever closer to your heart could please you now in early September, and after the 25th the sun awakens a treasured secret from the past and leads you through the enchanted garden of your memories. Linger in glowing geranium reds this month, arranging them as your enticing background or adding them seductively to your lips and fingertips, for their warm colors suit your loving nature. *Romantic days: 9, 14, 23.*

SAGITTARIUS
NOV. 22-DEC. 21

If glowing September gold is not reflected in your pocketbook as you might wish, turn your generous Sagittarian attention to the richer rewards of devoted friends who even now surround you with their love. The fires of a past romance flame up again in a déjà vu experience that will baffle you and delight your changing dreams, but before you rush blindly towards passionate temptations, heed the calm and thoughtful advice of a gentleman you admire who will move closer to you after the 22nd. With Mars to stir your memories and exotic Venus to open new avenues for sentimental journeying, enhance your Sagittarian beauty with bright nasturtium reds and oranges. *Romantic days: 16, 25, 30.*

CAPRICORN
DEC. 22-JAN. 20

Swaying like windflowers in an autumn breeze, your emotions will turn your heart towards a changing pattern of dreams, temptations and distant destinations, and your usually calm, cool, and patient Capricorn personality will turn fanciful and lighthearted, leading you into a dazzling whirl of choices. But, with Mercury wisdom to guide your wandering heart, you will find the peaceful pleasures you desire with a handsome and very dashing friend, while Venus will be working her mysterious, exotic spell to enrich your fortune through an unexpected source. The drifting moon brings the promise of a new romance on September's very first day, hinting at joys as subtle as the lavender shades that suit your September charms. *Romantic days: 1, 14, 27.*

AQUARIUS
JAN. 21-FEB. 19

Moon magic weaves its spell around your romantic Aquarian heart this month, drawing you closer to your nature's true place of peace and tranquil joy, while Venus shines its passionate warmth into the blossoming sweetness of a romantic relationship. The 14th begins a change of pathways towards a long sought goal, with fiery Mars disclosing new, surprising flowerings of your many talents, enhancing your chances if you use your gifts with true Aquarian wisdom. A touch of moonlight silver in your garments or your jewelry reflects the special, fragile, late-summer mystery of your beauty, as alluring now as white-petaled flowers in an evening garden. *Romantic days: 2, 21, 29.*

PISCES
FEB. 20-MARCH 20

Fickle Venus tempts and then deserts your faithful Pisces heart, ending an old love affair as the first week of September casts its end-of-summer shadows on the romantic interlude that has held you in its spell these past months. Yet with the passing of this memory, another dream begins to flower in your love garden, promising new and sweeter relationships in the coming autumn and untangling conflicting emotions that even now catch you in a sun-bright web. Whether you fly away on wings of imagination or of reality, September carries you on a Mars-inspired journey that should enrich your spirit, bringing you nearer to your dreams after the 23rd. Daisy white complements your charms. *Romantic days: 2, 18, 29.*

ARIES
MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Although early September finds your romantic Aries heart safely in its harbor-home, Venus beckons like a rainbow on the horizon, tempting you into a romantic intrigue that may well prove more substantial than sunlight on mist. Indeed, if you do not wish to have your heart ensnared in a lasting and binding relationship, you must use your Mercury wisdom after the 28th to keep your affairs as light and fancy-free as a butterfly in an autumn garden. Strength and promises of Mars could well provide an unexpected, deliciously surprising addition to your fortunes now. Meet all these sun-bright, tangled, star-crossed influences with the calm control of your cool, mistflower-blue surroundings. *Romantic days: 6, 11, 25.*

TAURUS
APRIL 20-MAY 20

Again, as in August, the September moon drifts twice over through your sign, spinning its silver magic about your glowing Taurus beauty, enhancing your most appealing qualities and drawing the fond attentions of a wise and slightly talkative Mercury lover. Though other secret ambitions may falter now, betrayed as they are by a difficult crossing of celestial paths, summer's end offers compensations that will ease your heart and enrich the sweet, relaxing pleasures of your home life. The bright whites and pinks of the multi-flowered phlox bring all the gaiety and allure of a September garden into your days and twilight hours, matching your warm, bright moods. *Romantic days: 1, 6, 28.*

GEMINI
MAY 21-JUNE 21

While voluptuous Venus generously spills her silvery luck, your fortunes increase and more than one wish may well come true. So when you see her shining in the September sky, know she shines for you. Your cool Gemini loveliness flowers under the moon's rays, and though the month may well start slowly, after the 9th your clever Gemini skills will guide you wisely through the crossing starpaths where, at month's end, your heart's dream of romantic moments will begin to flower. Are there no pitfalls in the moonglow? Ah yes, long journeys into unknown ways would be reckless now, so linger near the familiar and beloved, wrapping yourself in the bluebonnet lavenders of the autumn gaden. *Romantic days: 2, 11, 29.*

CANCER
JUNE 22-JULY 22

Generous Venus shares her luck with your Cancer intuition, so that your fortunes blossom like a garden of chrysanthemums, spilling gold on the pathways of your life. Meanwhile, as passionate Mars sets ablaze a once platonic relationship, tossing you into a fiery round of complications, your romantic affairs may be less to your liking. Do not be misled by the idle days of fading summer, for after the 11th the passing moon lights a gateway that opens your heart to the magnetic influences of the stars, whirling you into activity. Keep the gentle blues of the felicia or daisy wrapped around you like a cooling mist, protecting you from temporary displays of anger. *Romantic days: 4, 14, 25.*

LEO
JULY 23-AUG. 22

After September 8th, glamorous Venus and the moon's lucky node both glimmer in your sign, bringing your seductive Leo charms to their best display, while wise Mercury expands your fortune in the direction of your heart's fondest wishes. Although trouble murmurs from within your home life, your own generous nature will guide you towards a patient stance, allowing you to wait out the star-caused turmoil, knowing it will subside in the following months. Dress yourself in something soft and blue, reflecting the cool shadows of the larkspur, a flower that reminds you of a romantic episode in your past, its color touching your lover's heart to rekindle beautiful shared moments. *Romantic days: 6, 16, 27.*

NEXT MONTH IN CAMEO

TWO GREAT NOVELS:

LACE FOR MILADY
by Joan Smith

Priscilla Denver's wit was as sharp as flint and she had a tongue to match—attributes that did her absolutely no good in her reckless encounters with the cynical Duke of Clavering, who craved both her house and her heart

THE IRON GATES
by Kay Stephens

From the moment she arrived at Masterton Hall, Katherine found her future caught up in the mansion's devious past and her heart entangled in Lawrence Rushton's brooding soul

SPECIAL FEATURES INCLUDING:

A Gift of Love: The Royal Pavilion—a palace that housed bittersweet memories of a secret marriage

In the Wind: *Cameo* news about books you like to read, programs you like to see

The Chinese Willow Pattern: The beautiful legend behind the famous china design

PLUS:

Short Stories
Quotes to Remember
Poems of Love
Cameo Love Signs

A NO NONSENSE LOOK AT SMART SHOPPING.

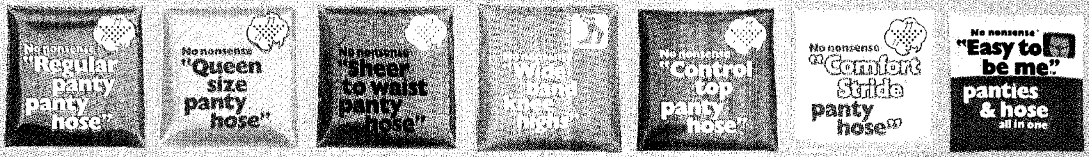
Cinch your waist for the latest wide-belt look. Pick a bold, bright color to top off basic shirts and blouses and dresses, too. Have some fashion fun for your money at $21.00.

An enamel flower will bloom on your neck today, a lapel, hat or a scarf tomorrow. Plant it on a wardrobe of different ribbons, by-the-yard for pennies. You can pick your favorite flower for only $6.00.

A striped cardigan leads a double life as a jacket or sweater. Dresses up a skirt or turns casual over pants. A bright buy at $60.00.

No nonsense® panty hose, with a cotton-lined ventilated panel for cool comfort, three proportioned sizes and a beautifully sheer fabric. With all that fit, all that comfort, all at a No nonsense price, they're a very smart buy. From $1.39.

Yes, the wool skirt that goes with everything is a beautiful investment. Very simply cut for a long fashion life. Well worth $25.00.


No nonsense "Regular panty panty hose"
No nonsense "Queen size panty hose"
No nonsense "Sheer to waist panty hose"
No nonsense "Wide band knee highs"
No nonsense "Control top panty hose"
No nonsense "Comfort Stride panty hose"
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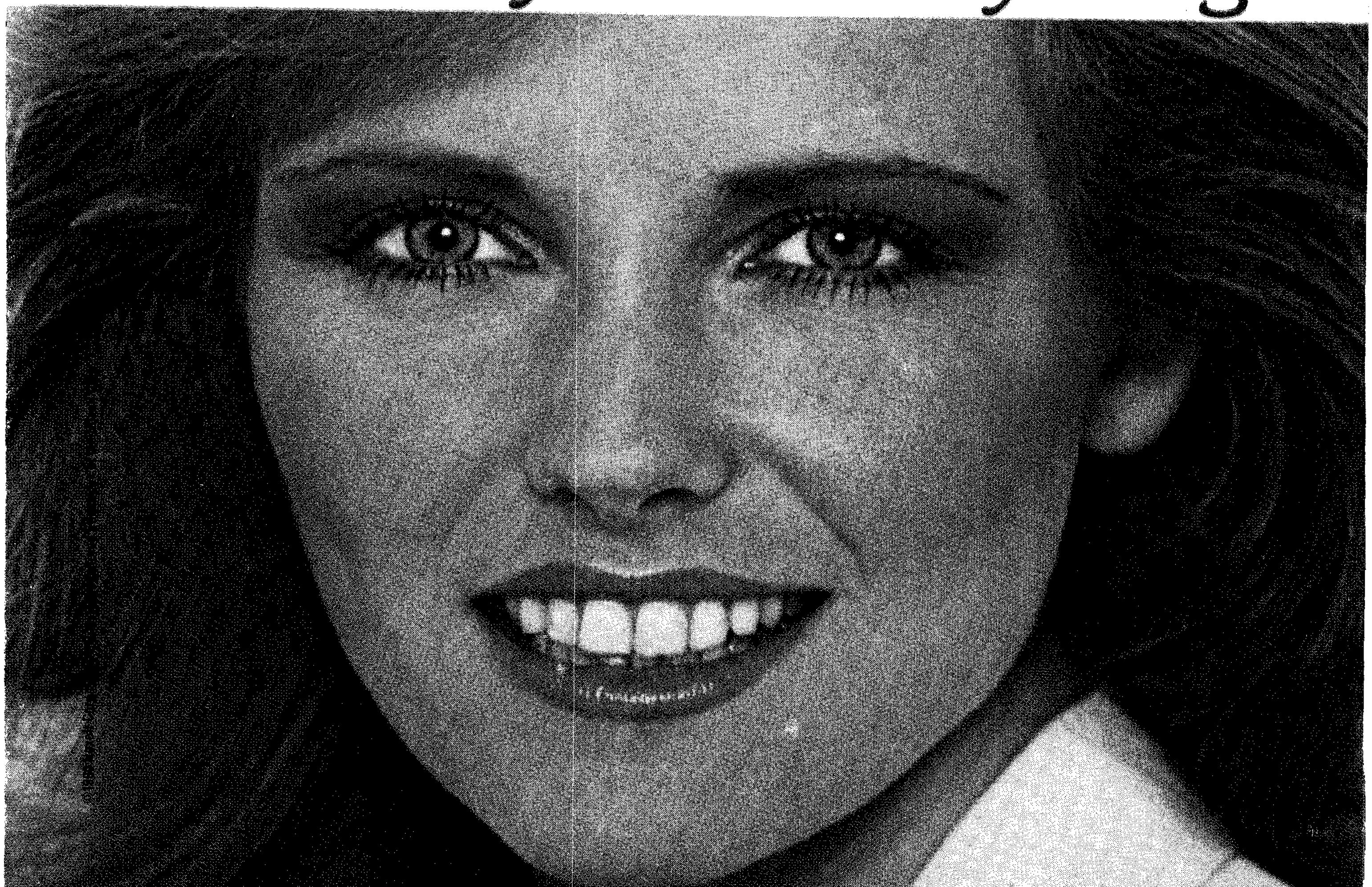
“Country Colors” shadows and the eyes of Cheryl Tiegs.



If you want to make the most of your eyes, do what Cheryl Tiegs does. Mix and match, blend and highlight with Cover Girl’s Country Colors shadow collection. All four shades are country-fresh and carefully picked so you can make up your eyes like a professional model. The combinations go on and on. And stay on, too, because each Cover Girl® shadow is moisturized to wear for hours.
Create your own Cover Girl eyes with Cover Girl Moisturized Eye Shadows. In six collections and 16 single-shade compacts.

Cheryl is wearing Brown Sugar,
Soft Turquoise and
Highlight Beige shadows.

COVER GIRL
Soft Turquoise/Fresh Green
Brown Sugar/Highlight Beige
Highlight Beige
Brown Sugar/ Soft Turquoise
gar/ Fresh Green
Highli

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